

| STORY |

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| ART |

Kuro Shina

2

YURI TAMA

From

Third Wheel

to

Trifecta



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Prologue: Love and Wishes

Love will change your world!

Those words suddenly popped into my head as I watched a couple who happened to be walking in front of me. They were holding hands, only they'd surreptitiously tucked those hands into one of their pockets to hide the act from prying eyes. It was a move straight out of some cheesy romance manga.

Yeah... Maybe it really is true, I reflected. I'd encountered the claim just a moment earlier, written on the cover of a magazine in the convenience store I'd stopped by—one of those fashion periodicals marketed mostly toward teenage girls. It was January 1, New Year's Day, and I couldn't even tell if the magazine was supposed to be an end-of-year or start-of-year special edition, so I think it sort of goes without saying that defining "love" was *completely* beyond me.

My name is Yotsuba Hazama, I'm sixteen years old, and I'm a first-year high school student with no redeeming qualities to speak of. I'm equally terrible when it comes to academics and athletics, and I barely even have any friends! Saying that I have no business talking about love would be an understatement—to me, love is about as realistic as princesses who live in castles, evil witches, princes, dragons, and all those other classic fairy-tale characters. But, like, who *cares*, right? What does it matter if love's never gonna change my world? I think it's praiseworthy enough for people like me to get by and carry on with their loveless lives!

...Yeah, I'm not even sure *who* I was delivering that excuse-laden internal tirade to. At least my hands were as warm as that couple's probably were, if only because I'd shoved them into the pockets of the brand-new duffle coat I'd bought during a New Year's sale. All that wasn't to say that my world hadn't done any changing lately, though, even if it wasn't on account of love. In fact, about nine months earlier, my admission into high school had triggered a shift

in my life more dramatic than anything I could've ever imagined!

Yotsuba! ♪

Hey, Yotsuba.

Just thinking about them made me feel like I could hear their lovely voices echoing within my mind, soothing my gray matter. Heck, it made me feel like they'd just materialized right before my very eyes: the angelically adorable Yuna Momose and the divinely graceful Rinka Aiba. The two of them seemed to live in a totally different world from me, and were so overwhelmingly revered by our peers that they were commonly referred to as the Sacrosanct, of all things...and *somehow*, they'd ended up becoming *my* friends!!!

At first, I'd been half convinced I was, er...I think they call it "getting catfished"? But I quickly realized that Momose and Aiba were such incredibly good girls it was almost absurd. Every time they learned about another of my not-so-great qualities, they just accepted it and moved on without batting an eyelash. They were nice and cute and cool, and spending time with them was just so much fun...and I quickly found myself so head over heels for them in a friendship sort of way that I didn't even *care* if I was getting catfished anymore. Heck, if it meant I'd get to savor even another second of this happiness, I'd fall for that sort of scam hook, line, and sinker! I probably would've happily given them at *least* an internal organ or two, if they'd asked! Like, uhh, my liver? I think people pay for those, right?

So, yeah, that probably gives you an idea of just how important they were to me. I'd just waltzed into high school and gotten two *incredible* friends right off the bat! It felt like I'd been promoted several ranks on the human-being scale out of nowhere...but *love* still felt like it lay somewhere far up above the clouds, sneering down at me with no intention of ever descending upon my head.

Momose and Aiba, though? *Their* situation couldn't possibly have been more different. Their relationship with each other was so spectacularly, excessively wonderful that nobody dared intrude upon the sacred realm that was the space between them, to start! As far as I was concerned, it would've been great if the thing they had had escalated into even an even more full-on and intense sort of yuri than it already seemed to be! Though of course, I was also okay with the

totally plausible scenario in which they each met their own respective special someones to explore the untrodden lands of love with. If love was hiding beyond the clouds for me, it was fluttering incessantly around the two of their heads, constantly within arm's reach.

We really do live in totally different worlds, I reflected. I was happy just being with them, really. My daily life had taken such a miraculous turn, I couldn't imagine it possibly getting any better. What I *could* imagine, though, was that someday, the two of them would find somebody way better than the likes of me to fall in love with—and when that day came, our remarkable friendship would come to an end, just like that.

I'm not saying that would be a bad thing, to be clear! If anything, it would be for the best. I'm not so full of myself that I'd ask them to stay super close with me or anything like that. The thing is, though, that the two of them were just so, so profoundly kind that I *knew* that when the time came, they'd probably try to spare my feelings somehow. I knew that I'd end up being a shackle, holding them back from their romances, and part of me was actually glad to realize that. I hated that part of me, and I hated myself for harboring those thoughts.

I didn't need my world to change. As long as the people I loved were happy, I knew I would be happy too. That meant Momose and Aiba. It meant my mom and dad. And it meant my beloved, adorable little sisters, Sakura and Aoi. There were so few people in that category I could count them on my fingers, but still, when I finally arrived at the offertory box I'd been lined up for and clapped my hands in prayer, their faces were the first thing that came to mind.

Please, let everyone be as happy as possible! I thought, dividing my wish into six evenly sized parcels, one for each of them. It wasn't the most ambitious wish, but all six of them were just such wonderful people that it seemed a lot more worth the gods' time than wishing for my own romantic prospects to improve. I had a feeling that the gods would agree as well.

"Hey, Yotsuba, let's go draw fortunes! C'mon!" prompted my younger little sister Aoi as I stepped away from the shrine's main building.

"Fortunes...? I think I'll pass, thanks. I really don't want to start my year off by

drawing a fortune that says I'll have terrible luck!" I replied, slipping right on into a super negative mindset that really didn't suit the occasion. My sisters were used to that little habit of mine, though—for better or for worse—and didn't seem to make much of it. "Anyway, are you sure it was a good idea to do your first shrine visit of the year *here*, Sakura?" I asked, turning to the older of my little sisters. "This shrine's supposed to bring people good fortune in love, right? You could've gone to one that's good for test-takers!"

"Meh... One shrine's as good as the next, as far as I'm concerned," said Sakura with a shrug, which didn't really feel like the sort of opinion you were supposed to express out loud when you were literally on the grounds of a shrine. She had a big scarf wrapped around her neck, covering up the lower half of her face, and her hands were shoved deep into her coat's pockets. She seemed to be in an ever so slightly irritable mood, but she *was* at the age where kids sort of just end up like that sometimes. She'd be taking her high school entrance exams next year too, which had to be stressful.

Still, I had to wonder—why had the two of them been so set on going to *this* shrine in particular? It wasn't like it was the most convenient one out there. We'd had to take a train and everything! "Hey, what did you two wish for?" I asked, too curious to restrain myself.

"Me?" said Aoi. "I wished for—"

"You know that if you say what you wished for out loud, it won't come true, right?" cut in Sakura.

"Wait, really?!" Aoi and I exclaimed in unison.

"I mean, I don't *really* know," Sakura said with a shrug, "but I *do* know that if you tell Yotsuba what you wished for, she'll end up trying to grant it."

"You bet your boots I will!" I proudly declared!

"But what if it's something she *can't* make happen?" Sakura continued. "What if it's something that needs time? If she runs out to try and grant your wish, she might even make it *harder* for the gods to make it happen."

"Wait, that actually makes sense!" I gasped. "You're so smart, Sakura!"

"Not like I really know what I'm talking about anyway," Sakura grunted as she

looked away from me. I had a feeling my praise made her a little bashful.

It was certainly true that I probably wouldn't be able to do much to grant their wishes, even if I *did* know what they were. Speaking as their big sister, that made me feel a little sad...but that was something I was going to have to get used to one of these days. After all, both of them were thankfully *way* more clever and accomplished than I'd ever be. I'm pretty sure the last time either of them had had to follow *my* example was back when they were crawling around on all fours!

"Oh, right—let's buy some charms while we're here, Sakura!" suggested Aoi.

"Good idea. We'll get one for you too, Yotsuba," said Sakura.

"Huh? I can just come along and get one for myself!" I protested.

"*You'd* probably screw up and accidentally buy a matchmaking charm," Sakura jabbed.

"Wait, why would that be a screwup?! You mean I'd be wasting my money since it's hopeless for me even if I get one?!" *That comment sure came out of left field! And for the record, there's no way I'd buy one of those on accident! I'd have to have a match worth making to even consider getting one, after all!*

But, of course, I made all those protests internally while I obediently sat around waiting for my sisters to finish their little excursion. As their big sister, that was about the best I could do.

"Romance..." I muttered to myself. I knew that someday, the two of them might fall in love with someone. Heck, for all I knew, they might've *already* fallen for someone! Maybe they didn't want me coming along with them specifically because *they* wanted matchmaking charms, and were too embarrassed to buy them in front of me, or something. *Ha ha ha—yeah, that sounds just like them!*

It probably wouldn't be much longer before they found boyfriends, started coming home later and later at night...and eventually moved out entirely. The next time they'd come home, they'd do it in a wedding dress, and I'd end up bawling my eyes out at the sight of them! I'd start having to worry less about making wishes when New Year's rolled around and more about preparing New

Year's money for my nieces and nephews every time they came to visit for the holidays...and by that point, that really would be the only thing left I could do for the two of them as their sister, most likely.

Love can change the world. Not *my* world, though—just everyone else's. And what if, eventually, they all moved on to their own brand-new worlds, leaving me alone in this one? What would I do then...?

"No real point thinking about it now, right?" I muttered to myself. I didn't *want* to think about it, really, even though I knew it was more or less inevitable.

Still, though, please...let me stay as their big sister forever.

I wasn't in front of the offertory box anymore, and there was no telling whether or not the gods were even listening, but I prayed with all my might anyway. Even if love *did* change the world someday, I wanted that one thing to remain the same. I knew it was a self-indulgent desire, but still...I wanted to keep being their big sister forever. *After all, ever since the day I met them, since the day I became their sister, they've been the most precious—*

"Yotsubaaa!" called out Aoi, waving happily as she jogged back toward me. Sakura was right with her and was waving as well, though she seemed a bit more shy about it. "Huh? Is it just me, or are you tearing up a little?"

"N-No way! Why would I be crying?" I insisted, trying to quickly deflect the question. "I, uhh, just got some dust in my eye, that's all!"

"Of all the played-out excuses..." Sakura sighed. She clearly wasn't buying my story, but a moment later she glanced up and let out a yelp of surprise. "Oh, wow! It's snowing!"

I looked up as well, and found flakes of powdery snow drifting gently down from overhead, covering up the terrible excuse I'd just tried to make. Part of me was tempted to think that the gods were backing me up, though the rest of me thought that was ridiculous. "Ha ha ha, I guess it was snow, not dust! No *wonder* it was so chilly!"

"Ha ha ha—of course it was," said Sakura.

"That's so *you*, Yotsuba!" Aoi added, then cracked up as well.

I guess the way I'd said that must've really tickled them somehow! Their first laughs of the new year! And yeah, sure, a day might come when I really *did* end up breaking down in tears over the two of them, but there wasn't any need to get a head start on that, was there?

"All right!" I said. "Let's head home! It's gotten pretty cold, after all...and gotcha!" I shouted as I grabbed onto Aoi's hand.

"Ah! I'm nice and warm now!" said Aoi with a smile.

"Come on, Sakura, you too! You're probably feeling pretty chilly, right?" I said, offering my other hand.

"I-If you insist," said Sakura with a frown, but she *did* shift the bag with our charms in it over to her left hand so she could take mine in her right. "O-Okay, yeah, I guess this *is* pretty warm."

"Hee hee hee, right? Same for me!" I giggled.

Considering they were getting older, and considering holding hands with their big sister was probably getting more and more embarrassing with each passing year, I had a feeling that they wouldn't give me all that many more chances to walk hand in hand with them like this. And so, I did my best to remember how it felt—to make sure I wouldn't forget their warmth. But if I ever *did* somehow forget, and even if they stopped reaching out to hold my hand, I knew that I could always reach out for theirs on my own initiative. After all...that's just how big sisters are.

Chapter 1: That One Little Problem That Stands between Everyone and Their Summer Vacations

July had arrived, and summer was in full swing! Summer was always one of the most assertive seasons when it came to declaring its presence—by which I mean it was just plain hot. A few steps outside was enough to bathe you in your own sweat, and if you got even a *little* complacent with your sunscreen routine, you'd end up with a real pain in the neck of a sunburn—or more likely, a pain-on-the-back-of-the-neck one.

To be totally honest, I wanted to lock myself in my room, turn the air conditioner on full blast, eat ice cream, and lie around like a lazy bum...but I'd have to save that for after summer vacation started. Before that happened, I had to surmount the enormous wall that loomed before me.

I gulped as I waited for the moment of destiny. I was in the student guidance room: a secret chamber that only our school's chosen hooligans were ever permitted to enter. Eichou High, of course, was one of the top-ranking high schools in all of Japan, so said room had apparently seen almost no use at all since the school's founding. I, meanwhile, had already been there more times than I could count!

"Sorry for the wait."

"Eeek!!!"

I squealed and jumped as my homeroom teacher, Miss Miki Abiko, stepped into the room with that somewhat flat greeting. You'll recall that it was an absolute scorcher out, but she was wearing the same perfectly crisp and ironed suit as ever, which, combined with her glasses, made for a look that she was seriously killing. I'd been in her charge since my first year in high school, and as a result, she'd ended up getting called the guidance room's watchwoman on more than one occasion, which was definitely not the sort of title *I'd* want to have slapped on me. Of course, I didn't really have any right to say that, seeing as I was the reason why she had to spend so much time in here.

“N-N-N-No, no problem at all! Thanks for coming!!!” I said as I jumped to my feet. You’d think I was a convict with how nervous I felt.

She hadn’t actually told me why she’d called me to the guidance room today, but it was pretty easy to guess: she wanted to talk about the results from last week’s final exams. *Here we go... How many did I fail this time?* I idly wondered. I found myself hoping that I’d at least be able to count the failures with only one hand, which was probably a solid sign that my case was already a hopeless one.

Every time midterms or finals rolled around, I added another batch of scores to my already impressive collection of failing grades. I studied my hardest, honestly, but it just never seemed to turn out well! I couldn’t seem to memorize the things I wanted to, no matter how hard I tried, and I had trouble staying focused on top of it. The whole test-taking atmosphere did bad things to my state of mind—the second I’d sit down for one, it’d feel like my head was spinning. Basically, I had a number of reasons why tests and I just didn’t get along. I mean, I’d only gotten into Eichou High in the first place by rolling a pencil around and lucking out big time! I have no clue how I made it through the admission interviews, honestly.

I really don’t deserve to be wearing this uniform, do I? But here I am anyway, and thanks to that, Miss Abiko—or rather, Miki—has to go through all this trouble every time the tests—

“Miss Hazama!”

“Huh?” I grunted as I snapped back to reality. Somewhere along the way as I’d waited for the bad news, I’d ended up hanging my head, but something about Miki’s voice sounded...elated, actually? I looked up at her, shocked, and found that she was *smiling* at me! Her eyes looked a little moist too, like she was on the verge of tears...but *why*?!

“This is incredible, Miss Hazama! Your tests—they’re incredible!” said Miki.

“I-Incredible how...?” I asked apprehensively. “D-Don’t tell me I finally managed a clean sweep?!”

Allow me to explain! A “clean sweep” refers to the act of failing every single test in every single subject! I was no stranger to failure, but so far I’d always

managed to pass at least *one* test by the skin of my teeth, and I had yet to achieve a clean sweep over the course of my career at Eichou High. Miki had made a habit of consoling me by saying that, hey, at least I hadn't gotten a clean sweep, right? I hadn't *quite* hit rock bottom yet! Was that streak finally at an end, though? Had I done so terribly on my tests that the one excuse Miki had left to make me feel better had been denied to her?!

"M-Miki, I...I'm so sorry..." I said, hanging my head once more.

"You don't have to apologize," said Miki. "Though I admit, I *will* probably feel a little lonely."

I blinked. "'Lonely'?"

"I'm not *really* supposed to hand your tests back until tomorrow, but, well...just look at this!"

"Huh...?"

Miki seemed so excited she could hardly contain herself as she spread a stack of answer sheets out on the table. Every one of them had my name written up top, of course, and every one of them...*wait, what?!*

"Forty-six out of a hundred...fifty-seven...fifty-two...s-sixty-one?!"

"This might just be the most moving event so far over the course of my whole career as a teacher!"

H-Holy moly! Are these seriously my answer sheets?! Eichou High drew the line between success and failure at forty points, and I'd cleared that mark on every test!!! "A-Are these scores for real?!" I asked.

"They are! The other teachers couldn't believe it either—they checked and re-checked your answers over and over again, so there's no mistaking it!"

Wow, the faculty have zero faith in me! B-But still...I can't believe a day would come that I'd get scores like these!

"Miki!"

"Miss Hazama!"

Overcome with the sheer emotion of it all, we hugged each other with all our

might. I knew for a fact that I'd cry if I let my guard down for even a second! This turn of events was just that miraculous!

"Tee hee—excuse me!" said Miki with an adorable smile. "I let myself get a little too emotional, I think. I'm sure the other kids would be horrified if they saw me acting like this!"

I was close enough with Miki to call her by her first name, but among the student body at large, she had a reputation for being quite strict. She was serious to a fault and completely unflappable. I'd never so much as seen her slouch for a second, and she wore her suit every single day of the year, no matter *how* hot it was! She was so habitually polite and emotionless, in fact, that some students called her "Miss Robot" behind her back.

Miki was no robot, though. She was a real human, through and through! She could seem a little cold, sure, but that was just a result of how seriously she took her interactions with her students. In truth, she was an incredibly kind, hardworking, and wonderful person! It felt sort of ironic that I'd ended up getting to know Miki's true self better than anyone on account of being a problem child who forced her to waste her time on my remedial lessons, but I'd grown really fond of her over the course of those sessions, and I was really, *really* glad to see how happy she was for me!

"It almost feels like I'm dreaming... Miki, I need you to pinch my cheek!" I exclaimed.

"Huh?! I can't do that! A teacher pinching her student would be corporal punishment!"

Wait, she's right! In that case, I had no choice but to be both the pincher and the pinchee. *Ouch! Yup, that hurts all right.*

"I'm amazed, though," said Miki. "Your grades on the midterms were really, *reeeally* horrendous—I can't believe you've improved this much in such a short span of time!"

"Really, *reeeally* horrendous...?"

"That's right! They were *reeeeeeeeeeeeally* just that bad!" said Miki. It seemed that now that I'd gotten decent grades for once, she could finally show no

mercy when it came to my previous results. My midterms *had* been a debacle, though, I couldn't deny it.

"I know what you're thinking, and I promise I didn't cheat," I said.

"Oh, I never suspected you of that at all!" said Miki. "*Nobody* in the faculty believes you're resourceful enough to cheat on *all* of your subjects without getting caught!"

"Th-That's, uhh...good, I guess? Does that mean they have faith in me, basically...?"

"It..." Miki paused. "Basically, yes," she concluded, breaking eye contact at the same moment.

Yeah. Okay. I think I know how to interpret that. "But you know, I really studied my hardest this time! With Yuna—ah, I mean, with Momose and Aiba." Indeed, my stunning scores this time around weren't the sort of fluke that had carried me through the entrance exams. I'd had two incredibly reliable supporters watching over me throughout every second of the process: Yuna and Rinka! All for the sake of our ultimate goal: to make sure that the three of us would be able to enjoy our summer vacation to the fullest!

"Oh, that's right," said Miki. "You and those two really never change, do you? You get along so well!"

"Uhh...yeah, I guess," I hesitantly replied. The way she'd said that we "never change" was just a little awkward, from my perspective.

Yuna and Rinka were special. They had the full attention of everyone at our school, and our teachers were no exception. That included Miki, of course, and it seemed she'd been worried for some time that the two of them were socially isolated. Or, I mean, as isolated as two people can possibly be when they're constantly with each other! The point, though, is that because she'd spent so long worrying about them, she was ecstatic when I made friends with them, and had been rooting for our continued friendship ever since.

The thing is, though...that sort of made the situation even more awkward than ever. *What would she think if she found out that I'm dating them? And not just that, but two-timing them with their knowledge and permission? No way I'll*

ever be able to tell her about any of this, huh...?

Of course, there was also no way I'd ever tell anyone—and I do mean *anyone*—the real story behind my grades. If Miki ever found out somehow, I'd probably pass out on the spot. You see, things had gone a little off the rails back when I was studying for these most recent tests...



Finals were right around the corner, and the three of us had gathered together in Yuna's room for a last-second study session.

"So, Rinka and I have talked about this a couple times before, but to make a long story short—Yotsuba, you're not actually as dumb as you think you are!" said Yuna.

"Y-You really think so?" I asked.

"I do! Just look at this, for example. I graded the worksheet you did just a moment ago, and—"

"Don't tell me I got all of the questions right?!" I exclaimed.

An awkward pause ensued. "Well, you got about seventy percent right, at least," said Rinka with a snicker.

I'd let my suddenly inflated expectations get the better of me, and boy, was I ever embarrassed about it! *Then again, though...when I really think about it, isn't a seventy percent success rate actually kind of incredible?!*

"If you can actually put your all into your work, solving problems like these is totally doable for you," explained Yuna. "The problem's that when you get called on in class or when you sit down to take a test, you *can't* put your all into it!"

"O-Okaaay?" I said, not at all following what she was getting at.

"In short, the question we have to answer is: what's the difference between this worksheet and a test that prompts such a dramatic shift in how you approach them? And the answer? Simplicity itself!" said Yuna, proudly adjusting the fake glasses she'd put on because they helped her get into the studying mood. *Adorable. Just adorable.* "Your problem, in short, is nerves!"

“Nerves?” I repeated. *She means, like, having a case of nerves, right? Like, when you get so worked up about something that you sorta just freeze up?* “You’re saying I’ve just been *nervous* this whole time?!”

“It’s *super* obvious that you’re freaking out whenever you get called on in class, at the very least,” said Yuna.

I guess that’s true? Whenever our teachers call on me, I get so surprised that I sorta just blank on whatever I was thinking about... But that’s just because it means I’m the center of attention! That’s pretty different from taking a test, isn’t it?

“I actually made a point of watching you the last time we had a quiz,” said Rinka.

“You *what*?!” I yelped.

“Yeah, you what?! That’s not fair! I’m so jealous!” shouted Yuna.

“Heh heh—my assigned seat *does* have its advantages! I can see everything she does from there, down to the look on her face!” Rinka boasted. She had the legendary seat that every student longed for: the one at the very back of the room, by the windows. Yuna, meanwhile, sat just one seat ahead of her. Our seating chart was determined by lottery, so it was all just a total coincidence, but it seemed that the Sacrosanct’s ability to gravitate toward each other was not to be underestimated. I still remembered the uproar in our classroom when we’d all learned where they’d been assigned to sit.

I, on the other hand, sat in the same row as Yuna, two desks to the right. It would’ve been hard for Yuna to see me with her neighboring student in the way, but now that I thought about it, Rinka *would* have a totally unobstructed view!

“When Yotsuba takes her tests...she looks *adorable*,” Rinka said in a wistful tone.

“H-Hey, Rinka—did you take pictures?!” asked Yuna.

“Of course not. We were taking a quiz.”

“You could’ve at least *tried*!”

Do you realize how unreasonable you're being right now, Yuna?! This probably goes without saying, but using our phones during tests was explicitly banned. We were even supposed to power them off during minor quizzes! The goal was to keep us from cheating, of course, though from what I could tell, only someone who was the only person in her entire grade level in danger of flunking out would ever even consider pulling a stunt like that. Someone like me...but, I mean, I wouldn't! Of course not, no way!



“Yotsuba, you have a routine you go through every time you take a test,” said Rinka.

“A routine?” Yuna and I questioned in unison.

“First you take a quick look at the problems. Then you worry for about...oh, five seconds or so? Then you lean *way* in to take a closer look at the paper, and finally, you lean back again and stare at the ceiling.”

I’d never been consciously aware of doing any of those things, but I had no doubt that Rinka was entirely correct.

“Ahh,” Yuna sighed, a look of understanding passing across her face. “So she gets too worked up reading the problems, and ends up in a state where she can barely think at all. The nervousness probably plays a factor too, and I bet all of that makes her start feeling pressured for time and stuff.”

“You might be right, when you put it that way...” I reluctantly admitted.

“Don’t feel down, Yotsuba,” said Rinka. “This all just goes to show how serious you are about your work.”

“Exactly!” said Yuna. “You never *start* by giving up—you always go into your tests with the mindset that you’ll do your best to get a good grade! That attitude’s one of the things I love about you.”

They were both doing their best to console me, and it *did* feel nice, but the fact remained that I hadn’t been able to properly overcome a single test so far, so I had a feeling I couldn’t let myself celebrate just yet.

“Hey, Yotsuba,” Yuna continued. “How did going through that worksheet feel to you?”

“What do you mean by ‘feel’?” I asked.

“Well, you got seventy percent of the questions on it right, so if you can figure out how to approach your tests with that same mindset, you might just be able to get a perfectly decent score on them.”

“For real?!” *Is that seriously possible?!* It goes without saying that seventy percent wasn’t even *close* to a failing grade! It was a score that seemed completely unreachable, considering the grades I’d gotten on every test

throughout my whole life up to that point...but I knew Yuna and Rinka wouldn't lie to me about that sort of thing. "I'm sorry, though...I don't really remember how I felt while I was doing the worksheet at all!"

"You don't have to apologize or anything," said Yuna.

"Actually, it didn't seem to me like you were taking it that seriously at all," noted Rinka. "You were chatting with us the whole time, right?"

"Huh, yeah," said Yuna. "She seemed *less* serious than usual, if anything... Wait! That's it, Rinka!"

"Huh?"

"Yotsuba's big problem is that she gets too nervous to think through her work, so if we can just make her relax, she should be able to do just fine!"

"Oh, I see now!"

The two of them certainly seemed convinced! *I...I guess that makes sense? It does seem like a reasonable theory, considering how this conversation's gone so far! But is relaxing before a test even remotely possible for me? Maybe it'd be easier if I just gave up entirely? Like, if I told myself that I was just gonna fail, and that nobody's expecting anything from me anyway? But, I dunno...*

"It'll be okay, Yotsuba!" said Yuna.

"Wha?"

"I just came up with the *perfect* method to make you relax!" she explained with a wink. Then she helped me up to my feet, and before I realized what was happening...

"Down you go!"

"Eek?!"

...she pushed me right over again. I was caught *completely* off guard and toppled onto her bed.

"Yuna?!" yelped Rinka.

"I had to think up a plan to help Yotsuba stop getting nervous and losing her composure when tests start. And the idea I ended up settling on is...this!" Yuna

said...then dove onto her bed after me?!

“Bgwaugh!” I grunted as I took all of her body weight (light as a feather, for the record) on my torso all at once. I’m pretty sure I sounded an awful lot like a cat that’d just had its tail stepped on, and speaking of cats, Yuna wrapped her arms around me and started rubbing her cheek up against mine in a distinctly catlike manner.

“You feel relaxed when you’re with us, right?” Yuna asked. “We might be in the same classroom for our tests, but we can’t be right next to you—so I figure we just have to use scent to our advantage instead!”

“S-Scent?!”

“That’s right! Our olfactory sense is far and away the one that impacts us the most on an unconscious level. You’ve probably seen all those aroma diffusers and stuff they’ve been selling all over the place lately, right?”

“So, you’re saying I should buy some sort of scent that helps me relax...?” I guessed hopefully.

“Non, non! We don’t have the time to go search for a scent that works well for you, and you couldn’t set up a diffuser in class at all, let alone during a test, right? That means we only have one option...I’ll mark you with my scent instead!”

“You’ll whaaat?!”

“Y-Yuna,” said Rinka, “that’s...”

See? That logic’s so outlandishly crazy that even Rinka’s—

“...that’s brilliant!”

—not getting weirded out by it at all?!

“I’ll help too, Yotsuba!” Rinka enthusiastically declared, then dove onto the bed—or rather, onto *me*—as well! I could feel her chest squish up against me very distinctly, and it was, well...honestly, all of this was just sort of incredible.

There I was, lying atop a bed while the two of them used me as a hug pillow. In an instant, we’d moved way beyond a realm where I could pay attention to scents! I was so nervous it felt like my whole body might burst into flames,

assuming my heart didn't pound so hard it popped first! And the fact that the two of them *had* to be able to hear my heart thumping away just made it all the more embarrassing... *Wait. Hmm?*

"W-Well, Yotsuba? What do you think...?" said Yuna.

"We're not stifling you, are we...?" added Rinka.

When I took a closer look at them, both Yuna and Rinka were blushing too. Plus, I could definitely feel a certain rhythmic, very fast and heavy thumping sensation coming from right around where their hearts would be.

Oh, I get it... They're just as nervous as I am!

The two of them were always so perfect and cool, always leading me by the hand, and they'd mustered up their courage to do something they were *that* nervous about, all for my sake. I felt equal parts pleased, embarrassed, and—though I'm not sure I should admit it—just a little bit greedy. Specifically...I felt a sudden impulse to tease the two of them.

"Yuna, Rinka," I said, then slid my arms beneath the two of them and pulled them closer to me.

"Wha?!"

"Y-Yotsuba?!"

Both of them yelped with surprise. Compared to what they'd done to me a second ago, this didn't feel like all that aggressive of an approach at all, in my book, but it seemed that neither of them could take what they could dish out on the affection front—or, as I learned a second later, on the getting-sniffed front.

"Yeah," I said as I took a deliberately loud whiff of the two of them, "you both smell really nice!"

"H-Hey! Yotsuba?!" Yuna practically shrieked.

"And you know, you smell totally *different* from each other too," I continued. "Different in good ways, though! You smell sweet, and fresh...and a little sweaty."

Rinka gulped. "N-Now that I think about it, I haven't taken a shower yet

today...”

“You don’t have to bother, Rinka. It’s fine,” I said. “I love the way your sweat smells.”

“Hyeeek?! *Y-Yotsuba!*” Rinka howled as I buried my face in the crook of her neck, then, without warning, gave it the tiniest little lick.

Of course, the tone of her voice was enough to set *my* heart racing in turn, and the teary-eyed look on her face was just so gosh darn *cute* it made me want to tease her even harder! For the record, though, she was at least as much to blame for that impulse as I was! She was always so cool and beautiful, and she practically *defined* the word “dashing”...but deep down, she was more pure and starving for affection than anyone else I knew. The sheer contrast between her usual image and how she was acting now was too much for me to deal with—heck, I don’t think *anyone* could handle it! Not that I was planning on letting anyone take my place!

So anyway, that’s why I didn’t just stop at her neck. I licked her cheek next, and then her ear, watching each time as she twitched and shivered...then turned to me, an almost imploring look in her eyes.

“Y-Yotsuba...” she said.

“Should I stop?” I asked.

“I...I didn’t say that...” Rinka whispered, then gave me a *look*. It was the sort of look that told me she wanted the exact opposite of that—she wanted me to do *more*.

I felt a sensation building up deep within my chest—one that made me shiver, but gave me the urge to—

“E-Excuse me?! Have you two forgotten that I’m here or something?!” Yuna pouted. I guess she’d gotten sick of waiting for us to give her a fair share of the attention.

“Sorry, Yuna!” I quickly said, turning over to face her. “I’ll dote on you all you want, don’t you worry!”

“Hmph! Seriously... You get carried away so easily, you know that?” Yuna

grumbled bashfully. She couldn't keep her true feelings from showing through in her expression, though—she looked a little happy, and more than a little expectant.

I wrapped my arms around her, pulled her close, and gently stroked her soft, fluffy hair. In terms of actual skin-to-skin contact, we weren't touching *that* much—just the occasional brush of my fingertips against her shoulders—but that was enough to make Yuna sigh and squirm. Still, though, I could tell that deep down she wasn't quite satisfied. "I'll spoil you more if you want me to, Yuna," I said.

"Yotsuba..." Yuna whispered, then buried her face in my chest. And then, just like I'd done to Rinka a moment ago, she took several long, deep breaths. "You smell incredible, Yotsuba... I love you... I wish I could stay like this forever..."

"You smell great too," I said as I stroked her hair. I could tell she took good care of it—it felt silky-smooth to the touch, and smelled as sweet as she did. The whole situation had me feeling like I was walking on clouds.

"Yotsuba," Rinka called out in a lonely tone of voice as she embraced me from behind and pressed her lips to the nape of my neck.

How are the two of them so good at asking for my attention? Gaaah, if only there were two of me so I could split my attention perfectly!

"Yotsuba... I wanna kiss," said Yuna.

"Bwuh?" I grunted.

"I can't hold back... I want to *feel* you," she said, her puppy-dog eyes on full blast. It was a powerful enough expression that even *Rinka* had to stop in her tracks for a moment, and yet...

"N-No... We shouldn't," I said. It took all the reason I had left—about a grain of rice's worth, or maybe slightly less, for the record—but I somehow managed to press a finger to her lips and stop her just in time. "You're the one who came up with that rule, remember? No kissing when the three of us are together."

For the sake of keeping our entirely consensual two-timing relationship going—for the sake of making sure I'd be able to keep dating Yuna *and* Rinka forever—we'd come up with one major rule so far that we did our best to follow. That

rule, of course, was “no kissing on the lips when we’re all together.” Technically we’d added a “for now” to the official clause, so it wasn’t necessarily a permanent thing, but still.

I loved Yuna and Rinka, and each of them was aware of and had accepted the fact that I was dating the other. And, well, maybe this was kind of selfish of me in a backward sort of way, but I really wanted to treat them both equally and give them both an equal amount of my love, without any unfairness or favoritism. The thing about kisses, of course, is that I could only ever kiss *one* of them at once. I’d *have* to pick one over the other, and even if I kissed them back to back, I’d have to choose who got to go first.

“Kissing us somewhere other than the lips is different! That’s okay! But if I had to watch you and Rinka for-real kiss in front of me...gah, I just know I’d get jealous!” is how Yuna had put it back when she’d proposed the idea. Rinka had immediately and emphatically agreed with the policy, so I’d been taking care to make sure I followed it. I *did* believe that someday we’d all get close enough that kissing would just be a matter of course, though.

“I want to kiss you too,” I said, “but we can save that for when we’re alone, all right?”

Yuna hesitated, then finally gave me a little nod. “O-Okay...”

“And that goes for you too, Rinka,” I said, looking over to my other side.

“R-Right,” said Rinka. “We’ll kiss as much as we possibly can!”

“Ah, that’s not fair, Rinka!” Yuna whined. “*I’m* gonna kiss her as much as possible too! We’ll kiss so much, she’ll forget all about you!”

“Well, then I’ll do the same!” countered Rinka. “I’ll kiss her so, sooo much, our lips will practically fuse together! Right, Yotsuba?!”

So, yeah. Needless to say, the rule hadn’t dispelled all traces of jealousy from our relationship quite *that* easily. My capacity for reason had its limits, as well, and I was *far* from having the sort of godlike sense of fairness and impartiality it would take to resist them forever, so there was no telling when I’d cave and slip up... But still, I was dedicated to treating our relationship as seriously and honestly as I could possibly manage. Speaking as the one who was two-timing

them, it felt like my responsibility to do so.

“But non-lip kisses are fine, right?! I’m gonna leave so many hickeys on her, she’ll be thinking about me twenty-four seven!” said Yuna.

“Two can play at that game! Get ready, Yotsuba!” added Rinka.

“A-All right! Come at me!” I shouted.

And so I turned the tables on them, only for them to turn the tables back on *me*, and those tables just kept on turning away as the hours passed us by in a state of blissful, flirty happiness. Huh? Studying? Wh-Whatever could you be talking about...?

Incidentally, when we disbanded for the day, the two of them *insisted* that if the “mark me with their scent so I can manage to relax during my tests” plan was to succeed, we’d need to go through the scent-marking process every day until the tests were over. And so, under the pretense of studying for our exams, we got together every single day for what I’ll just go ahead and call “extended aromatherapy sessions.”



Y’know, thinking back on it, we went way overboard in all sorts of ways, didn’t we? I found myself getting a little misty-eyed as I thought back on those days of boundless, unreserved affection. And man, who could have ever possibly imagined that our plan would *actually work* and keep me from failing my tests?!

In the end, I really *had* felt like I could constantly sense their presences off to my side throughout all the exams, and that sense really *was* reassuring enough to help me relax and approach the problems with a much clearer head than usual. *Now that’s a plan thought up by Yuna and Rinka for you! A plan thought up by the Sacrosanct themselves! They wrapped me up in their sacred aura, allowing me to render the impossible possible!*

“Miss Hazama?”

“Gah!” *Whoops! I got a little too into my flashback for a minute there!*

“Is something wrong?” asked Miki, sounding genuinely worried. “Your face is awfully red... Don’t tell me you have a fever?!”

“N-Nope, I’m totally fine! I mean, they say idiots can’t catch colds, right?!” I said, doing my best to quickly put her worries to rest. I mean, you *could* say I was feeling a different sort of fever, I guess, but this was no time for that sort of quibbling!

“But, Miss Hazama...I, umm, don’t think you’re an idiot!” said Miki. “And I really don’t like hearing you put yourself down like that.”

“Ah! I, er, right, that makes sense! I’m sorry!” I frantically apologized. *Nooo! Is my constant negativity starting to wear on Miki’s state of mind?!*

That felt particularly unfortunate since, really, I had her to thank for my success on the tests just as much as I did Yuna and Rinka. After all, I’d been failing for *ages*, and it was only thanks to her benevolence that I hadn’t been given up on and left behind entirely by the faculty at large. By this point, most of my teachers had started printing out worksheets to hand over to me and letting me take care of the rest, but Miki had always stuck around to help and advise me, even on subjects other than hers! I mean, forget the material on the tests—I’d had to study my entire first *year* in high school’s worth of material to get through this exam period, and if I hadn’t had her around to help me through all that, no amount of relaxation would’ve been enough to save me.

“I’m so, so glad that you’re my homeroom teacher, Miki!” I said, overwhelmed with gratitude.

“Miss Hazama...” Miki said, then paused. “N-No, much as I’m impressed and moved by your accomplishment, there *is* just one little thing...”

“Huh?”

Just when I was imagining the two of us exchanging a deeply emotional hug, having forged an unbreakable bond of trust and respect that transcended the bond between teacher and pupil, Miki broke eye contact and put on an awkward, uncomfortable smile. “I think you might have missed it while you were looking through your tests earlier, but...you didn’t pass *every* exam.”

“Wha?”

That caught me off guard. I picked up the answer sheets again and gave them another scan. *What? But how? I could’ve sworn I looked at—*

“Ah.”

Welp. There it is. And of all the subjects!!!

“That’s correct,” said Miki with a sad little nod. “You failed English.”

“B-But *whyyyyyy*?!”

I got a thirty-eight on English? Why did it have to be English?! Why did the one test I failed have to be the one that Miki herself teaches?!

“W-Well, you just made a few minor, careless mistakes, that’s all,” said Miki. “It’s nothing to get depressed about! But, well, rules are rules...”

And now she’s being really excessively understanding! Even though she’s the one who should be the most upset about this! “I-I’m so sorry, Miki! No—I’m so sorry, Miss Abiko!”

“Oh, you don’t have to be formal with me! I don’t mind if you keep calling me Miki! And besides, it’d feel lonely not seeing you at all over the summer, so teaching your makeup lessons is perfectly fine with me!”

Miki...was an absolute saint!!!

And so my second summer vacation as a high schooler was set in stone: I’d have a single failed test and one resulting batch of makeup lessons on my plate! The fact that I’d been just *one* subject away from passing everything was a little frustrating, but considering how I’d done on tests like those historically, I was more than happy with these results. And sure, I’d have *some* makeup lessons, but since I’d passed *most* of my subjects, I’d only have a few days’ worth of them toward the end of my vacation. The rest of the break, then, would be pure, unadulterated freedom... *Wait, seriously? Doesn’t that sound, like, kind of incredible?!*

Yuna and Rinka were both ecstatic when I told them the news, and I couldn’t help but giggle as I thought about how I’d be able to enjoy my vacation to the fullest now. I was on cloud nine, really. For the first time in my life, I’d be spending my summer with my girlfriends! Just the thought of it was enough to put a stupid grin on my face.

At that point in time, of course, I still had no way of knowing about the wild, outrageous trouble that awaited me shortly after summer vacation kicked off!

Chapter 2: Dating under the Influence of Delirious Happiness

“Okay, I’m heading out! Lunch is in the fridge, so feel free to eat whenever you get hungry!” I said.

“...”

“Okaaay...”

“W-Wait, what’s wrong, you two?”

It was the first day of summer vacation, and my little sisters had both gone to the trouble of following me to the entryway to see me off as I went out for the day...but for some reason, both of them looked a little upset. The older of the two, Sakura, had her arms crossed and just stared at me in silence, while the younger, Aoi, had given me a weirdly listless response and a reproachful glance, for whatever reason.



“Don’t tell me...you didn’t want chilled ramen?!” I gasped. The first explanation that came to mind for their behavior was the lunch I’d prepared for them. I’d thought it’d be the perfect dish—chilled noodles are summery and tasty, and you don’t even have to microwave them or anything! Maybe they’d thought that I was slacking off on their food, though?!

“I like chilled ramen,” said Aoi. “Actually, I’d love *anything* if you cooked it for us.”

“A-Aoi!” I exclaimed, downright touched. She was still giving me that stare, sure, but that was just such a nice thing for her to say! Sakura, on the other hand, was still totally silent...

“*What?*”

...until I stared at her for just a little too long and got *that* in response. *Is she really upset about the ramen, then? She’s not gonna say she likes my cooking?*

“Ugh...” Sakura grunted, her eyes shifting away from me.

She’s really not gonna say it...?

“I...I love your cooking too, okay?!” Sakura finally admitted.

“*Yaaay!* Thank you, Sakura!” I mean, yes, I might’ve kinda sorta silently pressured her into said admission, but she’d been going through juuuuuust a tiny little bit of a rebellious phase lately, and hearing her say that she *loved* anything about me had become an incredibly rare and precious occasion. Anyway, it made me so happy that I hugged her reflexively.

“H-Hey, Yotsuba?!” Sakura shouted in protest.

“Wait, why just her?! That’s not fair! I said I love your cooking first!” whined Aoi.

“Yeah, you did, didn’t you? Thank you too, Aoi! Your big sister loves *both* of you!” They’d only said they loved my *cooking*, granted, but thankfully my big-sister powers were there to swoop in and help me twist my interpretation of their words into something more convenient!

“But seriously, though,” Sakura continued, “neither of us are actually upset about lunch at all.”

“Huh? Really? But, I mean, I sorta get the feeling that you two only really think about me when you’re thinking about my cooking, right? So I figured it probably had something to do with the lunch I made,” I explained.

“I have *no* clue what you’re talking about,” said Sakura, who had shifted back into cold and callous mode at the drop of a hat...*or, wait, maybe she’s actually just confused this time.*

“We were just worried because you’re acting so suspiciously!” said Aoi.

“Huh? Suspiciously?”

“*You*, dressing up and going out on the very first day of summer break? That *never* happens!” Aoi insisted.

“Wh-Whaaat? Dressing up? I’m not—”

“Yes, you are,” said Sakura, cutting me off. “You just bought that dress the other day.”

“O-Oh, did I? I dunno, are you *sure* about that?”

“I mean, *I’m* the one who picked it out for you, so yeah.”

Oh. Right. I really *had* picked that one out on her recommendation after she caved to my request and went shopping with me the other day.

“And you’re wearing a little *makeup* too!” said Aoi, not about to let her sister outdo her on the seeing-right-through-me front. And I really was only wearing a *tiny* bit of it, on account of the fact that I’ve always been awful at doing my own makeup! “Heh heh,” chuckled Aoi, who must have seen through the look on my face next. “You’ll need a lot more practice if you want to pull the wool over *my* eyes!”

“I-I wasn’t trying to *trick* you or anything, though,” I protested.

“Okay,” said Sakura, “then explain why you went all out on getting dressed up today.”

I withered under my little sisters’ piercing stares. I never imagined they’d be *this* set on probing into my plans for the day...but I also couldn’t exactly tell them I was going out on a date with my girlfriend, right? It’s not that I wanted to lie to my little sisters, but I *was* worried that if they learned I was dating a

girl, let alone two, they'd think I was a weirdo or something. That would *definitely* hurt my feelings, and I'd *definitely* get really depressed! About their reactions, and, like, just in general!

"I-I'm just going to hang out with some friends, that's all!" I insisted.

"*Really?*" said Aoi. "You're not getting toyed around with by some scummy guy, are you?"

"Of course I'm not!"

"But would you *really* get that dressed up just to hang out with friends?" probed Sakura.

"I-I'm not really *that* dressed up at all, though! It's totally normal to wear a little makeup and put on your new clothes sometimes, right? I mean, I'm in high school! I'm all grown up!"

"Hmm...?" The two of them gave me another of those *looks*.

"A-Anyway, that's how it is! Nothing to worry about! And I'm gonna be late if I wait around much longer, so I've gotta go!"

And so the eldest Hazama sister fled from her little siblings like the cowardly little mook she was.



"Ah, hey! Over here!" Yuna called out, waving her hand wildly to get my attention. We were meeting up at our usual spot by the station, and she'd arrived earlier than me this time.

"Sorry I'm late!" I said as I jogged over to her.

"But you're not—you're right on time! And besides, I just got here too," Yuna said with an adorable little smile. She was just as cute as ever today, and I found myself smitten all over again.

"Yuna...are you sure it's okay for someone as cute as you to be walking around like this?! You didn't get hit on or anything, right?!"

"Heh heh—no need to worry about that! I have a secret weapon on my side!" Yuna said as she pulled out a stylish pair of glasses and slid them onto her face.

Wha?! They look so good on her, I didn't even recognize her for a second! Could this be that phenomenon where celebrities can put on a pair of glasses and go out in public without anyone seeing through to their true identities?!

"See? This makes me look a little more plain and unremarkable, right?" said Yuna.

"Not even *close*!" I replied. "You're super pretty to start with, and the glasses just make you look super smart on top of it! They make you look all, like...super cool and stuff!"

"D-Do they?" asked Yuna, a little taken aback.

"Yeah! If you *really* want a perfect disguise...you could wear an iron mask, I guess?"

"An *iron mask*?!"

"Right, since then you'd look like some sorta super tough warrior, and that image would overwhelm your cuteness! Though, then again...this *is* you we're talking about, so you might just get hit on anyway..."

"What kind of girl would ever go around wearing one of those, and what kind of lunatic would try to pick her up?!"

I was in a fix. There was simply no upper limit to how cute Yuna could be, and I lacked the knowledge to figure out a good pickup-artist countermeasure!

"Besides..." Yuna took hold of my hand, slipping her fingers between mine the way lovers do, and giving it a squeeze. "If you're that worried about people hitting on me, we can just do this to drive them away, right?"

"Ah."

"This way it'll be super obvious how lovey-dovey we are, right? And nobody will even bother trying to chat me up!"

"Lovey-dovey."

"Y-You didn't have to *repeat* it, did you...?" grumbled Yuna as a blush spread all the way to her ears.

You're the one who said it in the first place, though!

“Oh, and that’s not all—this’ll protect *you* too, Yotsuba!” Yuna continued.

“Huh? *Me*?”

“Yes, you! After all, you’re *ridiculously* cute too! I just know that all sorts of people would try to pick you up if I left you alone for a second!”

“I *really* don’t think that would ever—”

“It would!” Yuna insisted, puffing out her cheeks adorably.

So cute. So! Cute!!! I knew for a *fact* that I could never be anywhere near as cute as she was, but I *was* still super happy to hear her compliment me like that.

“You’re a little too defenseless for your own good, which just makes it even worse,” Yuna continued. “Rinka worries about you all the time too, you know?”

“D-Does she?”

“She does! So for today, it’ll be my responsibility to keep you safe and sound!”

O-Oh, wow, she sounds so reliable! She really did...but the way she made a proud little pose and smirked at me was also, once again, dangerously adorable. *My girlfriend’s the cutest, I swear!*

“Okay, then I’ll keep *you* safe too!” I replied.

“Yup! You do that!” said Yuna.

And so we set off, hand firmly in hand. Our destination for today’s date: the movie theater! The long-awaited film adaptation of a bestselling romance novel had just been released, and we were planning on seeing it. Neither of us had actually read the original book, of course, but in a certain sense I thought that would just make the experience better, since we could go into the movie without any expectations or biases.

“This feels a little strange, though, doesn’t it?” said Yuna. We’d arrived at the theater, which was located in a big shopping mall, and had just picked up the tickets we’d reserved online.

“What does?” I asked.

“Well, we’re about to go see a romance movie that stars a guy and a girl,

right? Two girlfriends, watching a movie like that?”

“Oooh... Yeah, when you put it that way,” I agreed with a nod as I looked out across the lobby. She had a point—it *did* feel a little strange. There were plenty of other people around waiting for the theater to open up for seating, and most of them were opposite-sex couples.

“You know, until I got into high school, I always sorta assumed that *I’d* get a boyfriend and go to the movies with him like everyone else,” Yuna muttered. She seemed to be looking back on her old self—reminiscing, maybe, as if it had been an age ago rather than barely over a year.

Honestly, I could picture her filling that sort of role pretty easily. Yuna could have absolutely played the heroine in a romance movie, and would’ve looked perfectly natural dating some incredibly handsome hunk of a man.

“Ever since I started high school, though? I’ve totally stopped thinking that way,” she said.

“Oh?” I prompted.

“Yeah. I mean...when I daydream like that nowadays, *you’re* always the person who’s by my side.”

And just like that, my heart did a somersault. *How does she say these things so casually?! Aggh, my face feels like it’s burning up!* I just *knew* I was blushing, and Yuna took one look at me, covered her face with her hands, and broke down in a fit of giggles. For a second I thought she’d just been teasing me, but then when I looked a little closer, I noticed that the tips of her ears were suspiciously flushed as well.

“R-Right—hey, Yotsuba, wanna get some popcorn? We can get a big tub to share!” Yuna abruptly suggested, though not without stumbling over her words a bit.

I had a feeling she was just changing the subject to hide her embarrassment, and that was just so cute of her I felt the sudden urge to hug her on the spot...but thankfully, I managed to resist it. “Hmm... I think I’m good, thanks,” I replied. “This doesn’t really sound like a popcorn sort of movie, you know?”

“Ha ha ha, yeah, that’s true,” Yuna giggled.

“Plus,” I added, squeezing Yuna’s hand and giving her a smile, “if we had a big bucket of popcorn in between us, I couldn’t hold your hand like this.”

“Meep,” Yuna squeaked.

“It’s such a good chance, right? I’d really like to feel you beside me while I watch... You don’t mind, do you?” I asked, though frankly, even if Yuna said she *did* mind, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to bring myself to let go. The moment that Yuna had fallen for me and the moment that I realized I’d fallen for her had been fairly far apart from each other. Plus, even though we were dating now, I was *also* dating Rinka. All this is to say that I *couldn’t* say I’d ever devoted myself solely to her. That didn’t change the fact that I was really, wholeheartedly in love with her, though, and that meant I couldn’t afford to compromise when it came to expressing my feelings for her!

“Oh, come *on*! You really don’t play fair, Yotsuba,” Yuna muttered bashfully—and a little sulkily—as she looked away from me. “If you keep talking like that, I’m *never* going to let you go. You know that, right?”

“That’s okay—I won’t let you go either!” I said as I gave her hand a squeeze.

As Yuna squeezed my hand back, all I could think about was the warmth of her palm.

“I’m going to be way too worked up to focus on the movie, at this rate,” Yuna commented.

“Hee hee hee—me too!” I replied. The two of us spent a moment giggling together, and before we knew it, the theater doors opened and we went inside to find our seats.



“Ugh... I was bawling my eyes out in there!” *Seriously, thank goodness I thought to bring a handkerchief!* I could tell that the original story had really earned its popularity. The film adaptation had been just *crazy* moving somehow!

“Throwing a terrible illness into the plot like that just isn’t fair! You can’t help but empathize with the characters when they do that!” said Yuna, who’d been sobbing just as hard as I was.

Actually, pretty much everyone in the theater had shed a tear or two before the movie was over. If I had to sum up the plot, it was basically, like, a bittersweet, youthful romance sorta deal with the classic three-hit combo of a terrible illness, a period of grieving, and a letter from a lost loved one to nail you *right* in the feels. Sure, all that stuff's kinda cliché, but it wouldn't have turned into a cliché if it weren't so effective to begin with! Anyway, halfway through the movie or so, I'd found myself starting to think about Yuna, whose hand I'd been holding the entire time. I wondered: what would I do if *she* were afflicted with an incurable illness? Or, flipping the script around, what would I leave behind for her if *I* were the one to contract a fatal case of Tragic Love Interest Syndrome...? Predictably, that train of thought just made the rest of the movie hit even harder than ever.

"Ah, be careful, Yotsuba!" said Yuna. "Try not to rub at your eyes too much—it'll make your eyelids get all puffy, and you'll ruin your makeup!"

I sniffed. "But... But I..."

"Come on, let me take a look," she said, then gave my face such a close inspection I found myself getting a little embarrassed. I mean, I'd *just* finished sobbing it up, and I didn't exactly have the sort of face that stood up to close inspection to begin with! "Hmm... Okay, looks like the damage wasn't too bad," she finally concluded.

Yuna, in contrast, looked totally fine despite her having cried as much as I had. Her eyes were ever so slightly bloodshot and her nose was just a little bit red, but I probably wouldn't have even noticed if I hadn't known to look for it. And even though she'd gone all out on her makeup, she'd somehow kept it perfectly intact despite all those tears! I was so impressed that I asked her how she'd managed it, and after a moment of awkward hesitation, she admitted that she'd used waterproof makeup for today's date.

Waterproof makeup? That's, like, makeup that's supposed to stand up to tears and sweat and stuff really well, right? "Wow, Yuna, you really planned this all out! You must've known in advance that you'd end up crying, right?" I asked, genuinely impressed.

"Am I being oversensitive, or does that make it sound like I'm some sort of

calculating schemer...?” Yuna grumbled. “But anyway, nope! I *always* take that sort of precaution when I go out with you!”

“You do? Really?” I asked.

“Well, I mean...imagine if I got all sweaty, and my makeup started running in front of you! I’d literally die of shame!”

“Wait, you mean you do it to look good for *me*?!”

“Duh! Of course I do! I *always* want to look my best when I’m around you! I put a lot of effort into this, you know?! Cleaning off my makeup’s actually really hard, and I always spend ages trying out different outfits, but I end up worrying about whether or not you’ll compliment me in the end anyway... I was so nervous last night, I could hardly sleep...”

“Y-Yuna...” *S-So! Cute!!!*

Yuna was fidgeting bashfully, every once in a while shooting me an expectant glance. It was really clear what she wanted from me, and I guess you could call putting on those mannerisms a little calculating on her part, but for me, it just felt weirdly nostalgic. After all, it was exactly the sort of act that Aoi always put on when she wanted me to praise her!

“Yuna!”

“Eek?!”

I fell for her act hook, line, and sinker, and in a bout of pure impulse, I pulled her by the hand to the most private, unpopulated place I could find—a nearby staircase—and gave her the hug of a lifetime!

“Wha—Yotsuba, what are you doing?!” Yuna yelped.

“Yuna, you’re adorable! You’re such a good girl!” I replied.

“A-A *good girl*?!”

“Yeah! You’re a really, *really* good girl!” I repeated, keeping one arm wrapped around her while I used the other to pat her head.

Yuna had seemed shocked at first, but it wasn’t long at all before she closed her eyes and seemed to start enjoying it. “Come on, Yotsuba,” she said. “You’re

treating me like a little kid again!”

“Is that a bad thing?” I asked.

“Yeah, it is... And to make up for it, you’re not allowed to stop until I tell you to,” Yuna said, returning my embrace and giving me her classic puppy-dog eyes. No question about it—she was in the mood to be doted upon!

Needless to say, I had no intention of *or* interest in refusing her. To the contrary, I just felt more and more affection for her build up within me with each passing second. Plus, the building we were in had an escalator *and* an elevator available, so barely anyone would bother using the stairs...which wasn’t to say there was *no* danger of somebody walking in on us, but regardless, I couldn’t stop myself. The prospect of getting caught wasn’t even close to enough to keep me away from her...or to keep *her* away from *me*.

“Hey,” said Yuna, “can I ask you for something?”

“What is it?” I replied.

“Kiss me,” she said with a brilliant, beaming smile. How such a simple, two-word request could come across as so adorable was beyond me. A second later, she explained, “I really like the idea of *telling* you to kiss me.”

“That’s...really *you*, somehow,” I said.

“Hee hee! Do you know *why* I like it, though?” she whispered, drawing so close to me our noses touched, so close our lips were only separated by the slightest of spaces. “It’s because I *know* that as soon as I say it, neither of us will be able to think about anything else.”

I paused. “Maybe we shouldn’t go through with it, then?”

“No way,” Yuna said, then kissed me.

Or rather, we kissed each other, then pulled each other closer before kissing again, and again. For a moment, the only sound in the stairwell was the ever so slight noise of our lips parting and the occasional gasping breath before we went back in for more. That was how Yuna liked her kisses—we’d touch, then separate, then touch once more. They were short, peck-like kisses, and with each one, it felt like my brain took another step toward dissolving into a puddle

of goo. I really *couldn't* think about anything other than her, no matter how hard I tried, and I couldn't stop until both of us desperately needed to pause for a moment and just breathe. Or really, in my case, gasp and pant for air.

"Haaah," Yuna gasped along with me. "Yotsuba... I love you..."

"I...love you too," I managed to say between breaths.

"Well, I love you more... I love you so, so much!" insisted Yuna.

She wasn't about to let it *or* me go, so I just held her to my chest and let her have her way, losing track of time as I stroked her soft, beautiful hair.



After we ate what wound up being a *very* late lunch, Yuna requested that the two of us visit a bookstore located in the same building as the movie theater.

"Ah, they have it! Look, over there!" Yuna exclaimed after a few minutes of pulling me by the hand here and there throughout the store. She pointed over at a poster for the movie we'd just seen...actually, no, she was pointing at a stack of books right beneath the poster: the original novel that the film was based on. "It was such a good story, I was thinking I wanted to read the source material!" she explained.

"Oh, that sounds great! Maybe I'll pick up a copy too," I said.

"I can just lend you mine when I'm done reading, you know? You said you were just about broke, didn't you?" noted Yuna.

"Ugh!" I grunted. "I-I mean, sure, but wouldn't it be more fun to read it at the same time? That way we can talk about it while it's still fresh in our minds." If I read it after Yuna was already finished, her enthusiasm for the story might've faded by the time I was finished and ready to talk about it, after all. I *was* well on my way to bankruptcy, sure, but still... *Maybe I'll have to beg my dad for a little more spending money.*

"Well, okay!" said Yuna. "We can both read it, and talk about it once we're finished!"

"Yeah!" I happily exclaimed.

We each picked up a copy of the book, checked out, and left the store. Just as

I was thinking about how I'd found another thing to look forward to over the course of the summer, Yuna prodded my arm with her finger.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I, umm...well..."

"Yuna?"

"So, I know this is *really* stupid, but...no, it's not stupid, really. It's actually *really* important to me, but you might laugh at me if I tell you," Yuna mumbled.

"I won't laugh at you! I swear!" I insisted.

"It's so like you to promise that without even knowing what we're talking about," Yuna sighed. "Anyway...I'll hold you to that, okay?" She took a deep breath...then held out the bag with the book she'd just bought in it toward me. "This is for you!"

"Huh? What?!"

"I-It's a present..." Yuna shyly muttered.

"A present...? Ah!" *Oh, that's what she's going for!* I immediately offered my own bag to her in exchange.

Yuna's tense, nervous expression melted away into a relieved smile and the two of us traded books.



It was like our own little private present exchange. Yuna got something for me, and I got something for her... And sure, both of the presents involved were copies of the same book, but the thought that I'd gotten mine as a gift from her made it feel so much more *special*, somehow. *How did she think up something this incredible, anyway? Yuna really is a genius! She's a pro when it comes to making me happy!*

Yuna pursed her lips in a pouty frown. "You're holding in a laugh," she grumbled.

"No, I'm not! I'm just grinning! I'll take good care of it forever!" I said.

"Well...now I'm starting to feel a little *jealous* of that book," said Yuna, pouting even harder in a way that tugged *right* on my heartstrings. I couldn't even begin to count how many times she'd done that to me over the course of this one day alone. "All right, we've got a little time left before it gets dark! I don't get that many chances to have you all to myself, so I wanna make the most of this and check out a bunch of other places while we can!"

"O-Okay, sure!" I agreed, realizing that today's heartthrob counter still had some time left to go before we got the final numbers in.

Yuna very literally pulled me away by the hand, and I followed along after her, wondering all the while if my poor heart would manage to last the rest of the day.



To make a long story short, my movie date with Yuna came to a close, and bam, the next day arrived! Today, I had plans to go out with Rinka. That's right—back-to-back dates, two days in a row! If I'm gonna be completely honest, even *one* of those dates involved expending an outrageous amount of energy, but the sense of satisfaction I got in exchange more than made up for all the calories I burned. I can't say I would have minded a *little* more time after each date to bask in the afterglow, but you can't have it all, I guess, and when all's said and done, the joy of being able to go out with them at all overwrote any apprehension with pure happiness! That's right—I'm *super* simpleminded like that! I'm downright easy!!!

Of course, two consecutive days of going out in the early morning meant two consecutive days of suspicion on Aoi's part. I mean, she *was* totally justified in observing that I was acting weird, theorizing that I'd caught some sort of strange illness, and noting that I usually spent the beginning of my summer vacations lazing around aimlessly at home. *And wow, actually, she really knows me well, doesn't she? That's exactly what I'd be doing if I didn't have a date today!*

Sakura, incidentally, had left early today for a mock exam. She'd been in a weirdly bad mood ever since I got back last night, though, and wouldn't even look me in the eye anymore, much less talk to me...unless I was just being paranoid and imagining it, I guess. *Maybe she's just nervous about her test?* This was around the time of year where she'd have to choose the schools she'd be trying to get into, and your grades on the mock exams were pretty important for that process.

"Hmm... No, no, I can't be thinking about this! She'll just get annoyed if I worry too much about her!" I told myself. Being a big sister meant feeling the impulse to be a little too nosy sometimes, but considering I was such a screwup, Sakura probably wasn't interested in getting *any* sort of advice or encouragement from me, especially as far as exams were concerned.

Anyway, let's get back on track! It's date time! Sounds like Rinka's already arrived at our meeting place. We were supposed to get together at, umm...the monument by the station, I think...?

"Ah," I unintentionally half-said, half-gasped as I looked over at the monument and saw a small, localized slice of some otherworldly, illusory fantasy realm. There she was, dressed in a simple, casual combination of a short-sleeved shirt and long pants that somehow brought out all the best parts of her figure at once. She looked like a model—no, she looked *better* than a model! There weren't any cameras around, of course, and Rinka herself was fiddling with her phone, not paying attention to her surroundings.

H-How should I get her attention? She seriously looked for all the world like a celebrity who'd gone out on the town incognito. Like she was the sort of person who had a genuinely radiant aura of charisma that you'd normally only get to see on TV, but who was doing her best to blend into the crowd and not stand

out...which isn't to say she didn't stand out anyway, of course. Even though we were dating, I found it somehow hard to work up the nerve to talk to her. Needless to say, that wasn't *her* fault at all—this was one hundred percent a me problem.

I guess I should start by sending her a text? I'll say I just made it to the station. In other words, my natural-born chicken instincts reared their head, and I chose to run away from the problem entirely. Deep down, I was absolutely hoping that Rinka would see my message, look up, and just happen to catch sight of me. I stood there, watching her and hoping things would play out that way...but instead, the moment she seemed to read my message, her expression stiffened up a little. She didn't look up from her phone, at first—instead, she looked like she was looking at *herself* using her phone's front-facing camera, brushing at her bangs and taking a few deep breaths. *Then* she looked up.

“Ah.”

And our eyes met. A moment later, hers widened as a blush spread across her face...and I'm pretty sure my expression was going through the exact same process. It felt like I'd just witnessed something I definitely wasn't supposed to see, and as shocking as it was, there was no denying it: Rinka had been *nervous* about meeting up with me!

Of course, I couldn't stand there gaping at her forever. I pulled myself together just enough to walk over to her. “G-Good morning, Rinka!” I said.

Rinka hesitated for just a moment, then said, “Good morning,” back in an ever so slightly sulky tone. “I thought you said you'd *just* gotten here in your text, Yotsuba,” she added.

“S-Sorry about that,” I awkwardly replied.

“I *completely* let my guard down... I can't believe you caught me acting this pathetic,” Rinka said, then let out a heavy sigh.

I'd chickened out and ended up getting her depressed in the process...which was a little depressing, yeah, but there was another, more important thought that took precedence in my mind. “You're not pathetic at all!” I shouted!

“Wh-What?” Rinka replied, taken aback.

“You looked, like, the opposite of pathetic! Every little thing you did was *perfectly* picturesque! It was like watching a movie, and a really exciting one at that!”

“O-Okay, but you don’t have to shout about it!”

There were plenty of things I still *wanted* to shout about, but I clamped a hand across my mouth and held them in on account of the fact that she was sort of right. My yelling *had* drawn no small amount of attention. Rinka stole the spotlight all the time when she was playing sports, of course, but I got the sense that she wasn’t really used to attracting attention in *this* sort of manner. And me? I wasn’t comfortable being the center of attention under *any* circumstance!!!

“Let’s go, Yotsuba!” said Rinka, taking me by the hand and leading me away from the progressively escalating awkwardness of the situation. I was totally okay with that for the most part, but I *was* a little unhappy that I’d missed the perfect chance to compliment the everloving crap out of her outfit.



“I’m really sorry about that, Rinka,” I said as she pulled me along.

“I’m not angry or anything,” Rinka replied. “I just think that would’ve been much easier if you’d just said ‘hello’ or something instead.”

“But you just looked so *cool*,” I muttered, once again lapsing into unfiltered compliment mode.

Rinka stopped in her tracks, spun around, and looked me right in the eye. “Do you think you’ll make me *happy* by flattering me like this, Yotsuba?” she asked.

“Th-That’s not what I was trying to do!” I quickly insisted.

“Well, you wouldn’t be wrong if you *did* think that. I feel a little pathetic admitting it, though,” Rinka mumbled, awkwardly breaking eye contact again. “You just always praise me so *naturally*. It comes out of nowhere, and it makes me so flustered each and every time...”

“Well, that’s *your* fault for being so perfect!” I countered. “How am I supposed to not praise you when everything about you is praiseworthy?!”

“There, see? You’re flattering me again!”

“But it’s *true*!”

There’s a reason why I’ve admired you so much since even before we started dating, you know! Rinka was so cool and athletic and had her life together so well that it was almost hard to believe that the two of us were the same age. But she was *also* a little spacey every once in a while, and had all sorts of traits that made her just plain adorable! And more than anything else, she was just so incredibly kind! She’d pay attention to everything I did and said, no matter how small and insignificant, and I knew that she’d always be there to back me up and watch over me. She’d been like that ever since I met her. I’d held back on showering her with compliments more often than not back then, largely because I figured she wouldn’t be happy to get a compliment from someone like *me*...but now we were dating, and in my mind that meant I had a free license to praise her socks off!

“That’s right,” I said, “it’s all your fault for being just so darn nice, Rinka! You can’t be nice to someone like *me* and not expect to get the same turned right back at you! An eye for an eye!”

“W-Wait a minute. I’m not sure if I’m following this anymore,” said Rinka.

“I’m just saying that I love you to bits and I always have, that’s all,” I clarified. *That* was one point that I’d absolutely never budge on. Even if she decided she’d had enough of me and told me to get lost someday, I knew I’d still adore her. But that wasn’t the case at the moment—I was in a position where I could stand right next to her and tell her that I loved her to her face, without reservation! I *had* to take advantage of that privilege! “And with that on the table...Rinka, your outfit today looks *incredible*!”

“Wha—now you’re *escalating* the praise?!”

“You’re like a celebrity who’s going incognito...no, make that a celebrity who’s *trying* to go incognito but just can’t pull it off ’cause their celebrity aura’s too strong!”

“I have an *aura*?”

“You have *such* an aura! It’s so intense, you’d be scouted for sure if you stood

around for long enough!” Speaking as a Rinka specialist, I had the authority to declare that conclusively! She might’ve just been a perfectly ordinary person who had the *aura* of a stealth celebrity for now, but there was an absolute and definite chance that she’d get scouted that very same day and become a celebrity for real! “Maybe I should go ahead and get your signature while I have the chance!”

“I don’t even *have* a real signature!” said Rinka.

Apparently, she hadn’t been the sort of kid who practiced signing their name all fancy-like back in elementary school. It was a whole fad in my class, at least. *Hmm? Did I practice my signature? Yeah, I, uh... Let’s just move on, okay?*

“And anyway,” Rinka continued, “even if I *were* scouted out by a talent agent, there’s no way I’d actually go along with it. That would mean less time I’d get to spend with you, after all.”

“Oh! Oh, right...that makes sense. Hee hee hee!” I giggled, giddy at the thought of getting to monopolize her time even as I felt a little guilty about stealing away the world’s chance to appreciate her. I was giggling *and* smirking, actually.

Rinka, meanwhile, reached over and patted me on the head.

“Th-This feels sort of weird,” I commented restlessly.

“It does?” asked Rinka. “Oh, right—you’re an older sister, so I guess it would. I bet that’s why you’re always patting Yuna’s and my heads, isn’t it? Like the other day, when—”

“Y-Yup, that must be it! I’m just not used to being the pattee!” I shouted before she could finish her thought. “The other day” could only have been referring to what our test study sessions had descended into, and in retrospect, boy, had I ever gotten carried away back then! Honestly, just thinking about it made me feel so embarrassed I wanted to curl up in a hole and die.

“Personally, I like patting your head like this just as much as I like it when you pat mine,” Rinka continued. “You’re so cute, and your hair’s so silky and fluffy... I can feel all my stress just melting away.”

“O-Oh, really?” I said. People didn’t call me cute every day, to say the least,

but on the other hand, Aoi and Sakura *did* both have features that fell right into the cute end of the spectrum. It wasn't *not* possible that I didn't have completely dissimilar features to them!

"Of course, I *would* still like you to dote on me a little sometimes as well," Rinka added.

"O-Of course I will! I'll dote on you till you can't even stand up anymore!"

"Till I can't stand up?! M-Maybe go a little less hard on it than *that*," said Rinka, smiling with both a little apprehension and a little excitement.



The plan for today's date: chat with each other as we walk aimlessly around town...not! No way I'd come up with *that* bad of a schedule...though, actually, that might've been pretty fun in its own right. But I was dedicated to making this the best date ever, so Rinka and I had worked out a much more well-developed plan in advance.

First up on our itinerary: we'd be having lunch at a pasta restaurant I'd seen featured on TV just a little while before summer vacation started! There was a line when we arrived and we had to wait for about twenty minutes to get a seat, but since I was with Rinka, those twenty minutes flew by in the blink of an eye. And, just like the program had claimed, the pasta was fantastic! The way they served it was incredibly photogenic too, and we kept chatting away about how a picture of one dish would probably get a ton of likes on social media, or how another dish looked good enough we were tempted to try it too. It was a really enjoyable lunch, all in all, but that was just the prelude before the day's *real* main event!

"Karaoke tiiime!" I shouted into the mic, listening as my own voice echoed and reverberated through the booth.

"Somebody sure is excited, huh?" commented Rinka.

"Well, yeah! I mean, this is the first time we've done karaoke with just the two of us like this!" I explained.

I hadn't really done much karaoke in general, personally. I never went alone, of course, and on the rare occasion I *did* go to a karaoke place, it was usually

with my family. I'd only been with friends once so far, and it was actually with Yuna and Rinka before we started dating! That was incredibly fun in its own right, for sure, but the point is that going to karaoke with just one other person was a totally new experience for me. And that person was my girlfriend, and that girlfriend was *Rinka*, of all people! Who needs food when you've got a situation like *this* to sustain you?!

"Hee hee hee," I giggled. The room was designed to fit up to four people, and it was neither especially large nor especially small, but there we were, sitting side by side, so close I could rest my head on her shoulder—which I did.

Rinka didn't flinch away or protest in the slightest. In fact, she casually wound her arm around my waist and pulled me in closer!

"This is really calming," I sighed.

"I know what you mean," said Rinka. "I think it's because of how warm you are, Yotsuba."

"Oh, yeah, the air conditioning *is* pretty strong in here."

"That's not what I meant," Rinka pouted. She seemed to think I was teasing her again. "I wonder if *this* will get the point across?"

"Wha?!" I squeaked as Rinka full-on hugged me, pulling me right into her chest! *S-Soft! She's so soft, and warm, and smells so nice!* I could hear her heart pounding rhythmically—I was so close that I could *feel* it, even. "Your heart's beating really fast, Rinka," I commented.

"And yours *isn't*?" countered Rinka.

"It...is, yeah," I admitted.

Rinka laid her hands on my cheeks and gently directed my gaze upward. There she was, of course, right in front of me...and for a few seconds we just sat there, staring into each other's faces. Then, without saying a word, we closed our eyes...only to open them again a second later when somebody knocked on our booth's door and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"I've brought the drinks you ordered," one of the karaoke place's employees said as they stepped inside with just...absolutely *impeccable* timing, seriously.

We'd leapt away from each other the second the knock rang out, and sat there in awkward silence as they set our drinks down on the table, taking great care *not* to spend too long staring at us or looking around the inside of the booth. You could really tell they were a pro at work.

Unfortunately, by the time the employee left, the mood was dead and buried. The sound of the TV in the room hadn't bothered me before, but it felt irritatingly loud in the uncomfortable silence that had otherwise fallen over us.

"So...do you want to sing something?" said Rinka.

"Sure," I said after just a second of hesitation. I still *wanted* to kiss her, but I couldn't exactly just come out and *say* that, so I just picked up my mic with a sigh.



Oh my god, this is so much fun!!! I finally understood. At long last, I was experiencing the *true* appeal of karaoke!

"Phew... How'd I do, Yotsuba?" asked Rinka as the outro to the song she'd just sung wrapped up.

"That was the *best*!" I exclaimed without hesitation.

It had turned out that our karaoke-ready song repertoires had quite a bit of overlap with each other's. We both mostly knew the sort of songs that were popular on video-sharing sites, got used in commercials or as the theme songs for TV dramas, or had been played during a New Year's music program at some point—so, super famous stuff, basically. That, of course, meant that I knew *all* the songs she ended up picking and could get hyped for each and every one of them! And, most importantly of all, Rinka was *really* good at singing!

Rinka had always had a clear, dignified voice that carried remarkably well, and when you supplemented her voice with musical backing written by a pro, it was elevated to even greater heights. Her songs were like a gift from the heavens above, and I got to have them all to myself! *What did I ever do to deserve such luxury?!*

The songs themselves weren't the only incredible thing about Rinka's performances, of course. Everything from the earnest expression on her face to

the way she'd occasionally glance over at me and smile to the way she stood with her back straight and her head held high was basically just perfect. *Too* perfect, even! I wanted to sit there and watch her forever, but of course, that wasn't on the table.

"Okay, Yotsuba, you're next!" said Rinka as she held out the little tablet you used to choose the songs you wanted to sing.

I was a little hesitant, though. I *liked* singing, to be clear, but singing right after Rinka felt a little embarrassing, somehow...

"I'm really looking forward to hearing you sing," Rinka commented.

That was all it took to cajole me into jumping right in headfirst. If it'd make her happy, and meant we'd get to both be doing the karaoke thing together, I was suddenly all for it!

"Hmm..." I muttered as I looked through the menu. "Ah, I know this one!" I exclaimed as my eyes fell upon a certain famous love song. It was a song that carried a lot of good memories for me, on account of the fact that the last time I'd been to karaoke with Yuna and Rinka, the two of them had sung it. And they'd sung it together too, as a duet! Listening to their beautiful voices ringing out in harmony was such a blissful experience, I could hardly believe it...

"What are you looking at...? Oh, *that* song," said Rinka as she peeked over at the tablet.

"I was just thinking how nice it'd be to hear you sing it again," I explained.

"Are you sure you're not just trying to trick me into letting you skip your turn?" jabbed Rinka.

"N-No way, not at all!" I insisted. I would've been lying if I'd said I didn't have *any* ulterior motives, but they were really tiny ones, honestly! Wanting to hear her sing really was the biggest part of it!

"That song *does* take me back a little, though," said Rinka. "You know we were singing it to *you* back then, right?"

"Wait, what?! Seriously?!" I'd been totally convinced they were singing it to each *other* at the time! I'd been too busy thinking about how the Sacrosanct

were just so precious, holding my breath, holding back my tears of joy, and getting lost in their serenade to notice. *And wait, the three of us went to karaoke together before we were dating, right?!*

“I guess you could say we were trying to drop a hint?” said Rinka.

“You *dropped hints* at me?!”

“That wasn’t the only time either. Not by a long shot, actually. Eventually we figured out that you weren’t going to notice no matter *what* we did, so we sort of started escalating the whole thing.”

“*Escalating* it...?” I repeated, stunned. I really *hadn’t* noticed, even a little bit. I mean, in retrospect, it *was* the sort of love song that was all about the singer professing their love to the listener, so maybe it was sort of obvious in retrospect.

“Anyway, this is really kind of embarrassing to explain to you... Ah, I know!” said Rinka, her face lighting up as an idea seemed to strike her. She turned to look at me, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Let’s sing a duet together, Yotsuba!”

“Huh?!”

“Well, we’re dating, aren’t we? It’s totally normal to sing with your girlfriend!” she explained with a truly joyful smile.

There was literally no conceivable way I could turn her down after having a face like *that* aimed at me. I worried for a second that my singing might just drown out hers...but then it occurred to me that we were the only people in the booth, so there was no one else around to care even if it did. That settled it for me—I picked out a song and set it to play right away. “Oh, right! You’ll need a mic,” I said, glancing around for a second one.

“No, one microphone’s plenty,” Rinka said, then scooted closer, pressing up against my side and leaning in so we could both sing into the same mic.

Genius!



“Heh heh,” Rinka chuckled with a smile. We were so close to each other, our cheeks were practically pressed together.

Soon the music began to play, and Rinka began to sing along to it. Every word she sang, every little gesture she made was just so lovely I could hardly stand it—but then *my* part of the song came along and I had to frantically snap myself out of the spell she had entranced me with and actually sing as well. Then it was Rinka’s turn to watch over me, her gaze full of warmth and affection.

We stood there, side by side, sharing a song together...and even when it was my turn to sing, I just couldn’t help but think about her the entire time. I was preoccupied by her warmth, by her scent, so sweet I could bask in it forever, and by her voice, so lovely that her song could melt me into a puddle if I let it. And then there were the words she sang—“I love you” is standard fare for love songs, but hearing it from her, combined with everything else, was almost too much. Her whole performance was a merciless assault upon my sense of restraint.

Nope, no good. I can’t take this anymore! “Rinka...” I said, my voice coming out full of longing, almost pained. I called her name, completely ignoring the fact that we were still only halfway through the song.

Rinka gasped, her eyes widening as she cut off mid-verse. I would’ve loved to finish the song with her, ideally, but I just couldn’t wait any longer. Something far more powerful than any song had been building up within me, and the lyrics we’d been singing had made it overflow, spilling out into a desire I could never possibly resist. Rinka, meanwhile, knew what I wanted in an instant and, without so much as a word, pressed her lips to mine. She embraced me, pulling me close to her, and an incredible sense of reassurance spread through me in an instant.

“Heh heh,” Rinka chuckled after our lips finally parted. “Nobody walking in to interrupt this time, huh?”

“Yeah...” I replied, so dazed I was barely holding myself upright.

Rinka was there to support me, fortunately, and helped me sit back down again. Then she used the tablet to mute the room’s sound system...and slowly pushed me over onto the couch. “I love you, Yotsuba,” she said as she looked

down at me.

“I love you too, Rinka,” I replied, looking right back up at her.

We gazed deeply into each other’s eyes as we expressed our love to each other in terms far shorter and less elaborate, but no less sincere than what a pro songwriter would come up with. Then I couldn’t help but gasp as she leaned in those last few inches and kissed me again—a forceful, forceful kiss, her lips pressed tightly to mine. It felt like she intended to hold nothing back, like she was never planning on letting me go. Not that it would be much of a challenge, since I had no intention of extricating myself from her grasp.

“Mhh...” I moaned as the kiss lingered on. Around the time I started to feel a little hazy and lightheaded, she finally pulled away from me again.

“Yotsuba,” Rinka said once more, her cheeks flushed red and her gaze intensely passionate. She was still leaning over me, her hands pressed down onto my upper arms, holding me in place. It took her a moment, but finally, she opened her mouth once more. “Can I ask for something...?”

“Huh?”

“I want...to try it deeper this time.”

“Deeper...? You mean, like—huh?!”

What exactly would “deeper” mean under these circumstances? It didn’t take me long to figure the answer out, and the second it hit me, my heart just about pounded its way out of my chest. I’d be lying if I said I’d never considered the possibility before—the possibility that there was more than one way to kiss, and that some of them were, well, *deeper* than what we’d done so far.

“I, umm,” I stammered, unable to bring myself to answer right away.

Simply put...I was a little scared. Not scared *of Rinka*, of course! No, I was scared of the unknown—scared of learning something so entirely new to me. My current relationship with Rinka—and with Yuna as well—was nothing short of miraculous. That, in my mind, meant that it was in danger of crumbling to pieces at the slightest disturbance. What if learning about and experiencing a way of kissing far deeper than I knew *changed* me somehow? What if it was the spark that ignited the latent desires within me and made me lose all sense of

control, indulging them with reckless abandon? What if it made me want *more*—want to go further and further with them, even past that point?

“I... I...”

Part of me wished that she wouldn’t even wait for me to reply, and would just steal my lips by force. I wanted her to use me however she pleased and make a total mess of me. I wouldn’t have minded—even if she or Yuna decided to be a lot less nice to me when it came to this sort of thing, I wouldn’t have batted an eyelash.

Rinka, however, just gazed down at me in silence, not moving an inch as she waited for my response. Her gaze, usually so dashing and straightforward, was now wavering and full of anxiety...almost like how it had been back when she first told me how she felt about me.

Oh, I get it. She’s just as scared as I am.

The two of them weren’t *just* kind and understanding with me because they were nice—it was also because they had the same fears and anxieties that I did. Even if you manage to work up the courage to take a step forward, if your partner doesn’t share your feelings, you might just end up getting rejected. I knew that if that ever happened to *me*, I’d probably end up flopping over on the spot and bawling my eyes out, and even though Yuna and Rinka *seemed* downright perfect in comparison to me, I was starting to understand that they were the exact same way.

Now, though, Rinka was trying to take that step forward. Yes, I was scared...but I also *wanted* to know all those things. I wanted to know more, to grow closer to her—to deepen our relationship as much as I could. And so...

“All right.”

...my answer was a matter of course.

I wrapped my arms around Rinka’s neck and pulled her down toward me.

She looked shocked at first, but that only lasted for a split second before she grinned at me. “I wonder if someone’s going to walk in on us this time?” she joked.

“Who cares? Let them catch us,” I replied. Even I was shocked by how bold I was being. It just goes to show how worked up I was, I guess.

I let out a low, quiet moan as our lips touched once more—and then our tongues. Instantly, a current of electricity seemed to rush through me, shooting up into my mind and blowing my thoughts away. *Rinka. Rinka. Rinka.* She was all I could think about—she occupied every corner of my consciousness. I wanted more. More of *her*. I clung to her with all my strength, focused only on the movement of my tongue. I wanted to deepen my connection to her—to taste her more and more.

It was around that moment that I noticed how, in all my frantic desperation to kiss her, I was making some *weird* and incredibly embarrassing slurping and smacking noises. I had to wonder: was that, like, supposed to happen? Was I doing it right? And most importantly, was I living up to her expectations for me?

Rinka gasped as she pulled away from me, her breathing ragged. It struck me that she’d been so entranced by our kiss, she’d barely been breathing at all—and unlike our kiss from a moment ago, this one was, well, *wetter*, in a word. That understanding drove in the fact that we really had taken the act of kissing to a new, deeper level with each other.

“Yotsuba...” Rinka whispered, slowly laying her hand on my shirt.

I realized what she was about to do in an instant, and I didn’t even consider protesting. I just lay there, gazing into her eyes, and—

Briiiiiing!

—choked! *Okay, the timing before was something, but this really takes the cake!*

The phone on the wall had rung, and both of us had just about jumped out of our skins. I know I’d been acting all cool about “letting them catch us” or whatever a minute ago, but the moment we were *actually* interrupted, the mood vanished in the blink of an eye and I regained my sanity.

Rinka, who was closer to the phone, reached over and picked it up. “Umm... Ah, yes, hi. Fifteen minutes? Okay,” she said. I gathered that it was one of the karaoke joint’s workers, calling to inform us our time was almost up. “An

extension? Umm... No, I think we're fine, thanks," Rinka said, glancing over at me, then hung up the phone. "Sorry, Yotsuba," she sighed.

"Huh? What for?" I asked.

"I went a little out of control," she awkwardly explained. "I wasn't thinking about what *you* wanted at all."

"B-But I *did* want all that!" I protested. I mean, sure, we might've crossed *multiple* lines if that call hadn't snapped us out of it, but I had been totally prepared to accept that! I didn't see anything that Rinka had to feel bad about...though on the other hand, the way she went so far out of her way to be considerate of me like this *was* one of the things I loved about her. I had a feeling that was why she'd decided against extending our stay in the booth. Anyway, I was so pleased by her thoughtfulness that I couldn't stop myself from sitting up and giving her a big ole hug.

"Yotsuba?!" Rinka yelped.

"We, umm...still have fifteen minutes left, right?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah," she replied.

"In that case, wanna just relax until our time's up?" I suggested. "I think we both got a little heated there, so, y'know...we should try to cool down before we leave, right?"

"Yeah... Good idea," Rinka said, then beamed at me and returned my embrace. And, yeah, hugging her *was* a little exciting in its own right, but it had a way of calming me down at the same time.

Being with someone you love really does take you to some strange places, I reflected, realizing at the same time that I'd fallen for Rinka even deeper than ever before.



"Well, I guess this is it for today," said Rinka with a smile that struck me as just a little bit lonely. We'd made it something of a habit to bring our dates to a close at the same spot by the station where we always met up. It would've been really nice for one of us to be able to walk the other home, but we knew our

families would be shocked if they saw us like this, so we agreed to refrain.

Come to think of it, I wonder if either of them have told their families about me? I'd been to both of their houses plenty of times, so they definitely knew I was *friends* with Yuna and Rinka, but did they know I was, well...?

"Yotsuba?"

"Ah, sorry! I got lost in thought for a second," I said, stashing that question away in a corner of my mind. I figured that it would be weird to ask something like that, and considering this was me we're talking about, I knew for a fact I'd forget all about it by the next morning. "Thank you, Rinka! I had a blast today, and I don't think I've ever sung that much at karaoke before."

"I had a great time too," said Rinka. "So, umm...thanks," she added bashfully.

It was so cute of her, I couldn't help but crack a smile.

I sighed deeply as I plodded my way home. Recently, I'd started feeling a sense of lonely isolation the second I ended up on my own. I was getting a little *too* used to being around Yuna and Rinka, and I couldn't even remember how I'd spent my time before I started dating them...actually, no, make that before I met them in general. It was only the second day of summer vacation, and it sort of felt like I'd already packed a whole summer's worth of activity into those two days—I was so satisfied, it was almost worrying. Plus...

"A real, grown-up kiss," I muttered to myself. I couldn't stop thinking about the full-on, tongue-to-tongue kiss I'd shared with Rinka. The experience had been sweet and electrifying, and sucked all the strength right out of me. It was, in retrospect, probably a little *too* intense for me. I mean, I *was* still more or less a kid! It had been so impactful that I *still* felt like I could faintly taste her, and I had a feeling that it wouldn't be long before I had a similar experience with Yuna, or before I went even further with Rinka...

"Ahh, just thinking about it feels like it's gonna drive me crazy!" Having that sort of first experience with *one* person was wild enough, and I'd be going through it all over again! I wasn't about to complain about that, though—after all, I'd chosen this path. I was dedicated to making both of them happy, and to never, ever letting them regret the decision to go out with me. In any case, I

didn't have anything scheduled for tomorrow, so I decided to take the opportunity to really nail down my plans for the rest of the summer!

"I'm hooome!" I shouted as I stepped into my house, once again full of energy! Of course, getting home meant that things were about to get pretty busy, if yesterday's precedent held true. I had laundry to bring in from the clothesline, a dinner to prepare, and cleaning that I hadn't been able to get done during the day. If I didn't get a move on, I knew for a fact that it'd be late at night before I knew it.

"Welcome back," said Sakura. I'd only just stepped inside and she was already right there by the door.

"Oh, Sakura! Thanks," I said. "Your practice exam's already over, huh?" She was still wearing her school uniform, so I figured she must've just gotten home.

"So, hey," said Sakura, folding her arms and shooting me a glare. "I have something I wanted to ask you about."

"Don't you want to get changed first, or—"

"Don't try to change the subject!" Sakura snapped.

What's going on? I wondered. *Is it just me, or is she in an even worse mood than usual today...?*

"Yotsuba," said Sakura.

"Y-Yes?" I replied.

"You said you were going out to meet up with your friends yesterday, right?"

"Y-Yeah, that's right."

"That was a lie, wasn't it?"

"Huh? A *lie*?" I repeated.

"The truth is...you were out on a date, right?"

A moment of silence ensued.

"*Huh?*" I finally managed to spit out. I couldn't even understand what she was saying at first. *What was that? "You were out on a date"? "Out on a date"... "a date." Wait. A date?! D-Did she see me? Yesterday?! When?! Where?! Wait—*

whaaat?!

I wasn't prepared for *any* of this, and it was all happening so suddenly that I'd already worked myself halfway into a blind panic. That panic, unfortunately, didn't bring any sudden revelations about how I could escape the situation, and all I could do was stand there in dumbstruck silence.

Chapter 3: Your Big-Sister Status Has Been Canceled

“So? I’m sure you have a great explanation for all this. Right, Yotsuba?” asked Sakura. She sounded pretty irritated and *entirely* unamused.

It was the morning of the next day, and Sakura was seated on the couch in our living room, staring me down with her arms crossed. She didn’t *say* that she wasn’t letting me take one step out of the room before she got some answers, but she also didn’t really have to—her bearing alone made it pretty obvious.

I understood why she felt that way, of course. After all, when she’d tried to question me the night before, I’d ended up flying into a panic, shouting, “Whaaat?! No clue what you mean! Whoops gotta go make dinner bye!” and fled. Even I have to admit that it had been a pathetically poor attempt at throwing her off my trail, especially considering I’d followed it up with “gotta go take the laundry in bye,” “gotta go clean the bathtub bye,” and “gotta do my homework bye” shortly afterward, beating a hasty and preemptive retreat every time it looked like she was about to say something to me.

Yup. I’m the worst. From an objective point of view, I’d been acting like a miserable excuse for a big sister! It was totally understandable that Sakura would’ve built up a pretty big bone to pick with me after all that, and unsurprisingly, she’d grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and forced me to sit down in front of her the second we finished breakfast and saw our parents off for the day.

“I’d really love to know too! You’ll tell us *everything*, right, Yotsuba?” said Aoi, who’d joined in on the interrogation for some reason.

I mean, okay, the reason was pretty obvious: the two of them shared a bedroom, so of course Sakura would’ve told her all about how I’d—

“I saw you too, you know? You looked like you were really enjoying your date!”

“Wait, you too, Aoi?!” I exclaimed. *So they didn’t exchange information after*

all! How did both of them just happen to catch me?!

“Yep! I saw you, all right. You and another girl were getting *really* friendly with each other,” said Aoi. She *sounded* cheerful, but she was doing that thing that cops do in police dramas when they’re interrogating suspects where the more cheerful they sound, the more pressure they exude! In a certain sense, she was even scarier than Sakura!

“Yeah, ‘really friendly’ sounds about right,” said Sakura. “There I was, going out to buy a textbook—because *I* care about my grades, you know?—only to see *someone* flagrantly flirting it up in broad daylight!”

Never mind, Sakura’s plenty scary too! I was starting to put the pieces together. Apparently, she’d witnessed me and Yuna when we went to that bookstore to buy the novel that the movie we’d seen was adapted from. “N-No, I mean, that was just—” I began.

“Let me guess: you’re about to say that the friend you were with is just really touchy, so it might’ve *looked* like you were on a date, but they act that way with everyone?” said Sakura.

Eep!

“I’ll admit, you’ve never really *had* any friends to go out with before, so I don’t have much to judge this by,” she continued, “but still—would you *really* get that up close and personal if you were shopping with a plain old friend?”

“They were holding hands! The way that *couples* do, even!” added Aoi. And she was right—how could I possibly explain the whole fingers-interlaced hand-holding thing as anything other than a sign we were dating?!

“Not to mention...you were making a face I’ve *never* seen on you before,” said Sakura.

“Huh?”

“You had this dopey, happy grin on the whole time—like you were so devoted to that girl, you’d do *anything* for her. I’ve *never* seen you look like that before. Not even once,” Sakura muttered, clenching her fists and seeming to force the words out.

At that point, Aoi took a step forward, tagging in so that Sakura could have a moment. “Hey, Yotsuba,” she said, “remember what you told us when you left that day? You said you were going out with some friends.”

“R-Right,” I replied.

“That was a lie.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. It was such a powerfully biting statement, there was no way I could come up with a decent response to it! You see people get called out for cheating in TV dramas and stuff all the time, and it was remarkable how similar this situation felt to one of those scenes. But, I mean, yes, I *had* gone out on a date behind my sisters’ backs, but I wasn’t *actually* cheating or—

“You’re trying to think up an excuse, aren’t you?” said Aoi.

“Nope! No excuses here! I’m sorry! I lied! I was out on a date!!!” I shouted with all my might, bowing down as deeply as I could in apology! What else could I do? They were *so mad* at me! And, like, when I really thought about it, that was a totally reasonable response! I mean, I was two-timing my girlfriends! It was *totally* understandable that they’d be horrified to learn their older sister was a filthy two-timer, and that wasn’t even starting on the part where the people I was dating were girls!

“The girl you were with certainly was beautiful,” commented Sakura.

“I know, right? I was shocked! I’ve never seen someone that pretty before!” said Aoi.

“Yeah, same. Honestly, the part I’m most confused about is why someone like her would be dating *you*, of all people—especially considering that you felt the need to lie about it to us.”

“That’s, umm... Oh jeez, where to even start explaining?” I stammered. It didn’t really feel like *any* explanation would be enough to satisfy them! *What should I do?!*

“Where did you even meet her?” asked Sakura. “Don’t tell me she hit on you on the street or something?”

“N-No way!” I shouted. “So, umm, both of them are actually my classmates,

and—”

“*Both of them?*” repeated Aoi, cocking her head.

Sakura was raising a skeptical eyebrow at me as well.

H-Huh? Why would that be the part they’d question...?

“Are you talking about the girl you’re dating?” asked Aoi.

“Why would you call her ‘both of them’? That doesn’t make sense,” added Sakura.

Huuuh...? Wait a minute—could it be? They haven’t figured out the two-timing part after all?! Thinking through the situation a little more carefully, I realized that since I’d gone out on dates with each of them individually the past two days, getting spotted wouldn’t have led my sisters to realize that I was dating two girls at all! It wasn’t like they’d seen me with both of them!

“Ah, no, I mean, wh-whoops, I misspoke! I meant to say ‘both of us are classmates,’ that’s all! Silly me!” I said, pivoting on a dime. *O-Oh, boy, does it ever look like they’re not buying it! Those are the frigid glares of a couple sisters who definitely don’t believe the story they’re getting fed!!!*

“Yotsuba...are you lying to us again?” asked Sakura.

“N-No...ah, I mean...” *Oh, man, trying to cover it up on impulse was the worst idea! Now they’re more suspicious of me than ever! Am I really going to keep lying to them like this, though? Is that really the right decision? I mean, just look at how mad at me they are! B-But how am I supposed to explain to them that I’m dating two people?!*

“Yotsuba?” said Aoi. “Do you really hate the thought of opening up to us *that* much? You won’t even tell us about the person you’re dating?”

“Huh...?” I replied, shocked once more by the sudden change in tone.

“You started going out with someone without telling us, and now you’re off in your own little world, acting happier than you’ve ever been when you’re with *us*,” said Aoi. “That really hurts, you know? I was with my friends when I saw you, but I ended up crying a little anyway,” she added with a sniff.

I couldn’t understand why this would be *that* painful for her, honestly. I was

her big sister, and I'd tried to watch over her and protect her this whole time, but apparently, I didn't really understand her at all... I was bewildered, and kinda just froze up. Sakura, on the other hand, seemed to understand where Aoi was coming from perfectly, and patted her comfortingly on the back without saying a word. I might be a dummy, sure, but even I could tell that there was an invisible barrier forming between me and the two of them. The thing is, I couldn't tell where that barrier was coming from at all! There was something about the situation that I was missing—something they knew and that I just couldn't wrap my head around.

"You guys," I said, trying hard not to break down into tears myself. "Of course I don't *hate* the thought... You know I love you, right?"

There was no way I could hate *anything* about them, and I never wanted them to have to even consider that possibility. Even if they got *super* mad at me, even if they forgot about me entirely, I was resolved to never stop loving my sisters—no matter *what* happened!

"Aoi...Sakura. I'm sorry for hiding this from you," I said. "I never meant to hurt your feelings at all! It's just that, umm...well..." I felt a stinging pain in my chest. Even as I was apologizing for hiding the fact that I was dating *one* person, I was still hiding away an even *bigger* secret. *What should I do? I know I have to tell them, but I'm just not brave enough to go through with it!*

"Whatever. I don't really care."

"Sakura..." I tried.

"Same," said Aoi. "What's done is done. We just have to accept it."

"Yeah..." agreed Sakura with a nod.

I could tell that she was forcing herself, though. Aoi was too, for that matter.

"Your girlfriend doesn't seem like a bad person, at least," Sakura continued. "She seemed a little...sophisticated, I guess? Or stylish? Anyway, I could definitely tell that she really does love you."

"Sakura..." I muttered once more.

"I mean, after all.../... No, never mind. It doesn't matter," Sakura added.

Why do I feel so bad about this? Because I lied and hurt them, of course...but that's not all there is to it. There was something else at play, and whatever it was, it was making me feel terribly stifled.

"I thought the same thing," said Aoi. "The moment I saw you with a girl that incredible, I thought, well, that's that. It worked the other way around too—just a glimpse of you walking together was enough to make me realize that *you* really love *her*. And the way she looked at you was so kind—it was like she was watching over you. I wish *I* could've turned out as cool as she is."

I felt the same inexplicable pain as I listened to Aoi talk as I had with Sakura. It felt like the two of them had given up on something, and whatever that something was, I'd never noticed it. Maybe it was something I wasn't *supposed* to—

"Wait a second," said Sakura, cutting my thought process right off. "Did you just call her *cool*?" she asked, enunciating the word *very* carefully.

Oh. Oh! D-Don't tell me...?

"Because the girl *I* saw her with was more, like...cute, I guess? Like, I wouldn't bat an eyelash if I saw her dancing at the front of an idol group!"

"Huh?" said Aoi, cocking her head once more. "But the girl *I* saw her with was so handsome, I almost thought she was a boy for a second! I wouldn't call her *cute*, exactly..."

O-Okay, yeah, their stories definitely don't seem to be matching up! Sakura saw me the day before yesterday, right? She went to the bookstore to buy a reference book, and just happened to catch Yuna and me when we went shopping there. But when did Aoi see me...? Belatedly, I realized that I'd never actually asked. Heck, I'd never even *considered* the question! I'd also thought I was all out of cold sweat at that point, but once again, I felt it start dripping down my back.

"S-So, guys?" I said. "There's, umm, actually one *other* thing I should probably mention—"

"Wait a minute, Aoi. What did she look like? I mean, like, her hairstyle and stuff."

“Her hair? It was black and really long.”

“Funny,” said Sakura. “The girlfriend I saw her with had sort of wavy brown hair.”

“Huh...?”

They were onto me, and I was onto the truth: Aoi hadn’t seen me the day *before* yesterday! She’d seen me *yesterday itself*!!!

“Yotsuba?” said Sakura.

“Y-Yes?” I replied, scared stiff.

“Considering the way our stories don’t match up...it sounds to me like you went out on dates with a cute brown-haired girl *and* a cool black-haired girl. Right?”

“I mean, uhh,” I verbally flailed.

The glint in Sakura’s eyes was sharper than it had ever been before, and Aoi’s were wide open as she stared at me with a look of total disbelief.

“Aoi? When exactly did you see her?” asked Sakura.

Aoi hesitated for just a moment. “Yesterday,” she finally replied.

“In that case... Well, I suppose it’s not *totally* impossible that her girlfriend went to a beauty salon and got her hair straightened and dyed after their first date,” said Sakura in a slow, deliberate tone.

There was, of course, a much simpler but also *very* much more unbelievable explanation staring all of us in the face, and the way she went out of her way *not* to point it out felt like a declaration that there was no point even saying it because she *knew* I’d just come up with some sort of excuse if she did. She was like a detective, picking apart a criminal’s elaborate web of lies...and being the criminal in question, my heart was pounding up such a storm I was afraid it’d burst.

“Okay,” said Aoi, “but how *tall* was she, Sakura?”

“Good question. The girl I saw Yotsuba with was shorter than her.”

“Oooh? Well, the girl I saw her with was taller than her! That’s not impossible,

though, right? Maybe she hit her growth spurt and just sprang up overnight!”

“Yeah, you’re right—it’s not *completely* impossible, is it?”

They sounded so casual—almost like they were teasing me—but every word they spoke carved into me like a knife. They had a big ole sword on hand as well, ready to slice my head clean off at a moment’s notice, but they just wouldn’t bring it down. No, it was up to me to take that last step. I’d have to deal the final blow on my own!

“I’m *so sorryyyyyyy*! I’m a dirty two-timer!!!”

I did it. They’d left me no other option. Socially disemboweling myself was simply the only choice, so I got down on my hands and knees, screamed out an apology, and prostrated myself before my sisters—not that I expected them to even think of me as their sister after *this*!

It felt like the air in the room had frozen over. *I* was frozen as well, and remained hunched over on the floor for quite some time—long after I heard the two of them walk off and leave me behind.



So my two-timing had been exposed. And to my *sisters*, of all people! The two of them didn’t seem capable of accepting that reality, and had shut themselves up in their room. I’d stood outside their door for quite a while, *wanting* to say something...but in the end, I couldn’t find the right words and fled outside.

Yup. That’s right: I ran away. Again. It was sort of my thing—the second a situation started moving in a bad direction for me, I’d head for the hills. I *knew* it was one of my big personal flaws, but it was one I just couldn’t seem to rectify no matter how hard I tried. Oh, and sinking into a pessimistic depression at the drop of a hat—that was another big one.

“I’m such an idiot,” I muttered to myself. “I’m a complete, hopeless idiot...”

For all I knew, my sisters would never smile at me again. When I considered taking care of the source of the problem, though—when I considered the possibility of losing my relationships with Yuna and Rinka—I just couldn’t even begin to imagine going through with it.

And, I mean, it's not like that would even help, right? The secret's already out, so even if I did try to fix things now, it'd be too late! I told myself, knowing perfectly well that it was an excuse even as I thought it. Excuse or not, though, I loved my girlfriends, and didn't want to lose them, no matter what. *But I also love my little sisters, and at this rate I might lose them instead!*

It just wasn't that easy. Picking one priority over the other was simply beyond me.

I wandered around at random for quite a while, and eventually found myself in a park located a fair distance away from my house. I'd barely ever been there before; it was kind of a miracle I knew where I was at all. Considering that pretty much everywhere in my neighborhood would remind me of my sisters in some way or another, though, the unfamiliarity of my surroundings worked out pretty nicely.

I sat down on a nearby bench and let out a long, heavy sigh. I'd been making a real habit of those lately. I felt a little spacey and unfocused, but that actually worked out nicely for me as well—after all, the less focused I was, the less I had to think about my current situation.

"If I ever get reincarnated, I hope I come back as a pigeon," I mumbled to myself as I watched the local birds stroll about the park. "It'd sure be nice to fly freely like they do..."

"A bad idea, indeed!"

I paused. "Huh?"

"Indeed, people eat pigeons in other countries! You're so slow that you'd be caught and eaten before you knew it, Yotsuba!"

Before I knew it, a life-sized doll had taken a seat on the bench beside me. *Wait, no—that's a person!* A girl with long, wavy blond hair and eyes as blue as a cloudless sky... *Wait a second. I'm feeling the weirdest sense of déjà vu...*

"You need a hunting license to catch pigeons in Japan, though! So if you do become a pigeon, you'll be all right as long as you stay here!"

"Wait...ah!" I shouted as the pieces finally clicked together. "Emma?!"

“Indeed! Hello, and good day!”

It was Emma Shizumi—a first-year student at my school, if I was remembering correctly. I recalled that she’d been born in Sweden, was half Japanese, idolized Koganezaki—the vice president of the Sacrosanct’s fan club—and was a lot stronger than you’d think, given how tiny and cute she was. I just hadn’t recognized her at first since she wasn’t wearing her uniform...

And actually, now that I look at it, what is she wearing?! What’s that style called? Gothic Lolita, I think? It looks ridiculously good on her! And also ridiculously uncomfortable, in this heat! She was only missing a frilly headdress to complete the image—instead, she was wearing a couple of hairpins shaped like shuriken, for reasons I could only begin to guess at. Come to think of it, she had a dango hairpin on last time, didn’t she?



“I decided to dress up a little for my outing today!” Emma explained, noting my stare.

“An outing? Where are you going?” I asked. I figured she was probably on her way to a fancy party or something. Still, I could only imagine how rough it would be to walk around at midday in a getup like that.

“Nowhere in particular!” Emma declared.

“Huh?”

“I’m on a stroll with no destination, indeed!”

I didn’t really get it, but that very incomprehensibility plus the free-spirited sound of it all struck me as very like her. She was pretty much the definition of an oddball.

“And now, I’ve found a Yotsuba! Lycka till indeed!”

“Lick a till?”

“Oh! I meant ‘good luck,’” Emma explained.

I got the sense that had been a little slip-up on her part. Maybe that was how they say it in Swedish?

“I’m still studying Japanese, and my dearest elder sister told me that it would be best to talk in Japanese as much as possible, indeed!”

“Oh, wow...that’s amazing,” I said.

“Not at all! Your Japanese is *much* more perfected than mine, Yotsuba! Indeed, *you’re* the incredible one!”

That’s only because I was born in Japan and can’t speak any other languages, I thought, but honestly, I didn’t mind the compliment. Emma just *exuded* sincerity somehow—you could tell that her praise was absolutely honest, which made it feel nice, whether or not she was even close to making sense.

“Ah! Will you drink some water, Yotsuba?” Emma suddenly asked.

“Will I what?” I replied, caught by surprise.

“You don’t look well, indeed! Just like last time!” Emma said.

“Last time,” I assumed, would mean the time she’d kidnapped me and tied me up on the rooftop. *And wow, when I put it in those words, that whole incident sounds pretty intense, actually!*

“I’ve studied since then. When people are out in the sun for too long, they get heatstroke! It’s important to hydrate regularly, indeed!” said Emma, pulling a water bottle out of her bag and holding it out to me.

“Umm... You don’t mind?” I said, a little hesitantly.

“Indeed, of course not!” said Emma, who thankfully just handed it over this time around rather than spraying it in my face.

It occurred to me that I hadn’t actually had anything to drink at all since leaving the house. Maybe *that* was why I’d been feeling so hazy? “Thanks, Emma,” I said.

“No, thank *you*,” Emma replied.

I wasn’t sure what she had to thank me for, but regardless, I took a grateful swig. *Ahh, that’s nice! I really needed this!*

“If that isn’t enough, I can go buy something else!” said Emma.

“N-No, it’s fine! You’ve helped me plenty already!” I quickly protested.

“Indeed? Don’t hesitate to ask if you need more, though! We’re friends, after all!”

Oh... She thinks we’re friends. I guess she did say that she’d gotten lucky because she ran into me a minute ago, huh? That made me feel...really happy, actually! Though I also couldn’t help but think it was sort of a shame, seeing as I probably wasn’t the sort of person worth making friends with.

“Do you feel better now?” asked Emma.

“Yeah, thanks,” I replied. “That really hit the spot.”

“Wonderful! Indeed, you looked *very* glum when I found you—I was worried!” said Emma as a big, dazzling smile spread across her face.

Her happiness was palpable, and it felt like my worries were melting away...for a moment, anyway. *She* didn’t know anything about what I’d been

dealing with lately, and somehow, that meant that being around her made me feel a little less overwhelmed.

“My elder sister is always sad when you’re glum,” Emma added.

“Huh? Koganezaki is? Seriously?” I asked.

“Indeed! Sometimes she’ll mutter your name and press on her head right about...here!” said Emma, pointing to her temple.

Er... Doesn’t that mean I’m giving her a headache, not making her sad or worried? “I, uhh, think that’s probably a sign she *doesn’t* like me, actually.”

“That isn’t true at all! Indeed, I’m *certain* beyond a doubt that she doesn’t dislike you!” Emma insisted. There wasn’t so much as a trace of uncertainty or deception in her gaze—no, there was only a twinkle so brilliant, it made me want to cover my eyes reflexively.

Of course...I also knew that if Koganezaki ever found out about my two-timing, her hating me would be the *least* of my worries. She was the vice president of the Sacrosanct’s fan club: an organization dedicated solely to protecting Yuna and Rinka. She was, in short, more or less a saint! She’d given me quite a bit of advice about the two of them recently, sure, but if she learned about my relationships with them, I was absolutely confident that her attitude toward me would take an instant turn for the hostile.

I mean, as things stand, I’m basically betraying her trust, right...? In retrospect, I might’ve been a little too optimistic about quite a few things. My situation wasn’t as simple as I’d given it credit for—just because Yuna, Rinka, and I were okay with our arrangement didn’t mean we’d face no opposition from here on out. *I really, really should’ve thought this through more carefully, huh?*

“Yotsuba?” said Emma, peering over at my face. My melancholic mood must’ve shown through in my expression again. “What’s wrong?”

“Ah, umm... I was just thinking about how you seem to admire Koganezaki an awful lot, that’s all. You really love her, don’t you?”

“I love her indeed!” Emma agreed without so much as a hint of hesitation. It was a pure and definitive expression of affection, and somehow, it made my

mind drift back to how Sakura and Aoi had treated me in the past.

“*We love you, Yotsuba!*” they’d shout, hugging me and clinging to me, all of us as happy as could be... Thinking back on that time was starting to make me a little teary-eyed. Those days were gone, and I had a feeling they wouldn’t be coming back. “I’m a little jealous of Koganezaki now,” I sighed.

“Do you want to be my elder sister too, Yotsuba?”

“N-No, that’s not what I meant! I, umm...I actually have a couple of little sisters already.”

“Oh? Indeed... Then you’re *already* an elder sister?”

“Yeah, though I don’t think I’m nearly as good at it as Koganezaki is... Actually, I’m downright awful. My sisters are both really upset with me after a fight we had today. Actually, no, the fight’s not the problem—they’re holding me in contempt because I just keep screwing up.”

“In contempt?” Emma repeated.

“Ah, umm, ‘holding in contempt’ basically means—”

“‘To scorn, disparage, or look down on something,’ indeed!”

“Oh. I guess you know what it means even better than I do, huh?”

“Why would they hold you in contempt, Yotsuba?” asked Emma. The way she asked was so direct and the look in her eyes so sincere, I was pretty sure she wasn’t *just* asking out of curiosity.

I hesitated for a moment, but eventually, I began to timidly explain.

“Because...I lied to them,” I said.

“*Why* did you lie to them?” Emma asked.

“Because...I had something I wanted to hide from them,” I replied. I felt like I was airing all my sins in a confessional booth, and Emma looked almost angelic to me, somehow. Her actual appearance probably had something to do with that, sure, but it was more her *attitude* that gave me the impression—the way she listened to me without expressing a hint of judgment or malice. The look in her eyes was just so *pure*.

"In that case," Emma said with a smile, "you didn't do anything wrong at all!"

"Huh?" I balked. I sure hadn't expected *that* to be her response!

"Indeed, *everyone* has secrets! Could it be that you weren't telling them everything because you were afraid the truth would hurt their feelings?"

"Y-Yeah," I replied. "That's exactly it! I didn't want to hurt them!"

"There must be something complicating the situation! What is it?"

"Well, it's kinda... Wait, n-no, I can't tell you! No way!"

"Indeed?" said Emma, cocking her head.

"Well, I mean...if I told you, I know *you'd* hold me in contempt too," I said.

"Indeed..." Emma replied with a nod. "In that case, you don't have to tell me anything!"

I could've sworn that girl didn't even know the *meaning* of the word "negativity." There wasn't so much as a trace of it in her expression, that's for sure! Emma just dropped that line of questioning without a backward glance, and took my hand in hers.

"Having secrets isn't bad!" she chirped. "Indeed, I'm sure my dearest elder sister has things she isn't telling me, even! But still—I love her anyway! I know *your* sisters will never hate you either, Yotsuba!"

"E-Emmaaa!" I said, just about ready to bawl my eyes out.

"But," she continued, "if keeping the secret is hard for you, and if someday you decide that I *wouldn't* hold you in contempt if you told me, then indeed, I'd be happy if you did... Hm? Did that make sense? Indeed, I don't know *what* I'm saying anymore..."

"No, it's okay," I said with a shake of my head. "I understand what you meant. I really do."

Back when we'd talked on the rooftop, I'd gotten the idea that she was an incredibly free spirit, and that's more or less where my impression of her had ended. Now, though, I was surprised to realize that she was an astonishingly nice girl—and *really* smart to boot! She was such a good girl that if I decided to

judge the rest of humanity using her as the standard, then just about everyone else would end up looking bad in comparison! *Maybe she really is an angel? I wonder if she'd be interested in living in my mind and taking my angel's place...*

"Ah!" squeaked Emma. "I changed the subject! You were worried about your argument with your younger sisters!"

"R-Right, yeah," I said.

"I can only speak from the standpoint of a younger sister myself, though... Indeed, I don't think I can be very helpful," Emma muttered.

"What? No way! You've already been *super* helpful!" I exclaimed.

"Indeed? I'm glad to hear it!"

I really couldn't articulate how much better I felt after speaking with her. Before she'd showed up, I'd felt like I was at rock bottom and I couldn't even bring myself to face the issues before me. Now, though, I could finally lift my head once more. I wanted to thank her, but I just couldn't find the words to properly express my gratitude.

"But if you *do* want to ask an elder sister what you should do," Emma continued, "then you should just ask *my* elder sister for help!"

"Huh? You think I should ask *Koganezaki*?"

"Indeed! I'm *positive* she'll have just the right advice for you!"

"I dunno, though... Isn't she really busy?" I asked.

"No need to worry!" said Emma. "My elder sister will be at home today, I'm certain, and her home is just nearby!"

"Oh, huh! Really?"

"It's right there!" said Emma, pointing at...

Oh jeez! That's the most famous and expensive high-rise apartment building in the whole area! I guess Koganezaki is a rich girl, now that I think of it... No big surprise she'd live in a ritzy place like that.

"I will contact her and tell her you're here! You can have my water, Yotsuba—stay here, and be careful not to get heatstroke!" Emma said, wrapping the

conversation up without wasting a beat. The water bottle she'd given me was thoroughly lukewarm, at that point, but I was still grateful that she was thoughtful enough to leave it for me. "And with that, I'm off!"

"R-Right! Sorry for interrupting your stroll!" I said.

"It's no trouble at all! Indeed...I was glad to talk with you!" Emma said with a grin, then hopped off the bench and trotted off as swiftly and suddenly as she'd arrived.

She'd said that she was glad to talk with me, but really, I was the one who should've said that to her. I knew that if she hadn't happened to find me, I'd still be stewing in the depths of depression—not to mention passed out from heatstroke. She hadn't just lifted me up a little, she'd pulled me right back up to my feet! Metaphorically, that is. Literally, I leaned back onto the bench and looked up at the cloudless sky above me. Before, I hadn't had the presence of mind to notice how clear it was, or the dry intensity of the heat.

"It really is a nice day out," I murmured, letting out a sigh with a very different tone from my usual ones as I gazed on and on at the bright blue sky.



I drained the bottle of water that Emma had given me, stood up to throw it out, and bought another bottle from a nearby vending machine while I was at it. Right as I returned to sit down on the bench again, I spotted Koganezaki walking into the park. *So she really did come*, I thought, feeling both grateful and also slightly guilty as I stood up.

Koganezaki looked almost a little frantic as she glanced around, but an expression of relief came across her face for just an instant as her gaze fell upon me. "Oh, good. You're still alive," she said as she walked up to me.

Is there some reason why she'd think I wouldn't be? Just what the heck did Emma tell her...? "H-Hi, Koganezaki! Thanks for coming," I said.

"Yes, hello. I never imagined I'd meet with you outside of our school," she replied with an irritable frown, flicking her long, black hair over her shoulder. She was wearing her school uniform, for some reason. She wore the same design that I did, by the way, though she looked *way* more natural in it than I

ever had.

“Did you go to school today?” I asked.

“No,” Koganezaki bluntly replied.

“Then why the uniform...?”

“I needed an outfit to go out in, and it was on hand,” said Koganezaki.

I took that to mean she didn’t feel the need to get dressed up to meet with me. *Harsh*. “I was half convinced you’d show up in some sort of crazy outfit like Emma’s,” I joked.

“‘Crazy outfit’...?” repeated Koganezaki. “Why, what was she wearing?”

“Uhh... I think the style’s called Gothic Lolita?”

Koganezaki sighed. “Of *course*. For the record, she doesn’t make a habit of dressing that way. In fact, she doesn’t make a habit of dressing *any* way in particular. She’s the sort of person who reaches into her closet, grabs the closest outfit at hand, and wears it no matter what it is,” she explained.

I figured she was trying to stick up for Emma, under the assumption I’d been weirded out by her clothes. She’d said it as brusquely as ever, of course, but I could tell that there was some real affection behind her words, and they made me feel a little warm and fuzzy.

“So? I think it’s about time you told me what you called me all the way out here for.”

“Umm, I mean... *Emma’s* the one who called you out, technically...”

“Fair enough. I’ll go ask her, then,” said Koganezaki, already turning around to leave.

“Wait, no! I was kidding! I’m sorry!” I shouted, frantically grabbing her by the arm. I thought I *might’ve* heard an irritated tongue-click, but I decided to assume I’d just imagined it! “So, umm, there’s actually something I wanted to ask you for advice about,” I explained.

“Advice, is it...?” said Koganezaki. “Hazama, are you under the misapprehension that I’m some sort of counselor?”

“Nothing like that—I just think you’re someone I can rely on!” I replied.

“Oh...? Well, I suppose that puts a better spin on it, at least,” said Koganezaki with another sigh—this time, of resignation.

Thankfully, it seemed she was willing to hear me out. *I knew she was a good person!*

“I’m already here, so listening to your story won’t waste much more of my time than I already have, that’s all,” she added a second later.

I knew she was just putting up a front, though—I mean, that was *barely* even rude—so my positive opinion of her remained unshaken!



Koganezaki asked me if I was hungry, and I quickly realized that yeah, I actually was. I’d lost track of time, but now that she’d pointed it out, it struck me that it was right around lunchtime, and that I’d also skipped breakfast. I was actually pretty famished.

I wonder if Sakura and Aoi will be all right handling lunch on their own...? I hadn’t had the time to make them anything in advance before I ended up fleeing the house, so I was a little worried. Then again, they were middle schoolers—surely they could grab something at a convenience store, order delivery, boil up some noodles, or something along those lines. Come to think of it, I’m being overprotective, aren’t I? I just keep screwing up...

Worse still, thinking about the two of them made me recall the look of contempt they’d given me when the truth finally came out. I felt a squeezing pressure in my chest, and for a moment, it was like I couldn’t even breathe...

“Hazama? Are you all right?”

“Ah... Koganezaki,” I said, looking up and coming back to my senses.

“Do you feel sick? I’m still curious about whatever Emma was going on about...but for now, should I take you home?” she asked.

“N-Nah, it’s nothing! I feel totally fine!” I insisted.

“Oh...? Well, good. I hope you’ve been hydrating?”

“Oh, yeah, I have! Emma gave me a bottle of water, so I’m all good there,” I explained.

“She did...? Well, I’m glad to hear it. I suppose explaining how all of that really works after the *incident* was worth the effort after all,” Koganezaki said with a sigh of relief.

She’d been giving me a really pointed look up to that point, but the moment she saw me acting all weak, she suddenly got all *nice* with me. I was almost a little worried that someone would take advantage of that side of her someday...though of course, I’m sure she’d say that was none of my business.

“So, umm, what did you mean by ‘whatever Emma was going on about’?” I asked.

“Right, yes... Let’s find somewhere to sit down before we have that conversation,” said Koganezaki.

She ended up leading me to a perfectly ordinary, everyday restaurant. It was one of those casual sit-down places—a chain you could find just about anywhere in the country that boasted reasonable prices for remarkably tasty food. I used to go here all the time with my family, though not so much recently... Anyway, being at this place in particular was sending me on a bit of a nostalgia trip. I’d been prepared for Koganezaki the rich girl to take me somewhere way out of my league, by the way, but I had to assume she’d deliberately picked the sort of place that commoners like me frequented out of consideration for me.

“Table for two,” Koganezaki said as she stepped up to the reception desk. She seemed quite used to the whole procedure as she exchanged a few words with the waiter, who soon led us to a table by the windows. “This is my treat. Feel free to order whatever you’d like,” she said as we sat down.

“Huh?!” I gasped. “No way, I couldn’t!”

“It’s not a big deal,” Koganezaki replied. “And besides, you took care of Emma for me, didn’t you?”

“That’s not how I’d describe what happened with her at all, personally,” I mumbled. “Plus, I’m about to ask you for advice, so *you’re* basically taking care

of *me*.”

“Hmm... Fair enough. In that case...w-we’ll split the check, I suppose.”

“Great!”

With that settled, we called the waiter over. I ordered spaghetti, Koganezaki got a meat-sauce doria, and we both paid a bit extra to get access to the place’s drink bar.

“That’s an interesting choice of dish,” said Koganezaki. “It’s simple, in a nostalgic sort of way.”

“You think so...? It’s what I always order when I come here,” I explained. As for *why* I always ordered spaghetti...it was because of Aoi.

Back when she was little, Aoi was a lot more demanding than she’d grown up to be. Whenever we went to this restaurant as a family, she’d always go on and on about how she wanted to have all sorts of different dishes. Our mom and dad would always order her favorites so they could share part of their meals with her, and I ended up picking up the habit as well and started making a point of ordering spaghetti, one of her all-time favorites, and splitting it with her.

Of course, Sakura would always throw a fit at that point about how it wasn’t fair that only *Aoi* got to share my food, and the two of them would end up devouring most of the dish themselves. Then my mom and dad would share some of *their* food with me, and my sisters would imitate *them* in turn. By the time we were done, it never really mattered who’d ordered what to start with. I couldn’t help but let a quiet giggle slip out as I thought back on those family excursions.

“You certainly look happy,” commented Koganezaki.

“I was just reminiscing a little,” I replied, then told her about how I’d used to come here with everyone.

It occurred to me that she might’ve felt a little uncomfortable being suddenly subjected to a long-winded story about someone else’s family—none of whom she’d ever even met—but if she did, she didn’t show any sign of it. She just sat there, quietly listening until I was finished.

“Is that so?” she said once I was done. “That’s a very charming image.”

“Ha ha ha! Well, now I’m feeling kinda embarrassed about it,” I said.

“You shouldn’t. It’s a wonderful memory,” said Koganezaki. “If anything, I should be the embarrassed one. They call these places family restaurants, but I haven’t been to one with my actual family even once.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really. I’ve only ever come here alone. It’s close to my house, it’s cheap, and they have counter seats for singles, so it’s quite convenient all around,” she explained.

“Huh,” I said. “I guess this is a good place to go when you want to be alone?”

“That’s not exactly how I’d put it,” said Koganezaki. “I’m more or less always alone. I live on my own, after all.”

“You—*huh?! I shouted. A high schooler living alone! And if Emma was right, she’s living on her own in that ginormous, super fancy high-rise apartment building! Her lifestyle really is on a totally different scale, huh...?*

“It’s definitely not as impressive as whatever you’re imagining,” Koganezaki muttered. She sounded a little exasperated, with me *and* herself. “I’m not paying for it myself, for one thing. My grandfather arranged for my current housing, and I’m hopeless when it comes to taking care of the place... You cook for yourself, don’t you? I have to admit, I respect that about you.”

“Y-You respect *me?! I gasped.*

“I’m not up to standard in more ways than you could imagine,” Koganezaki continued. “Really, I’m hopeless...”

From my perspective, Koganezaki had always looked more or less perfect, but I had a feeling that behind closed doors, she had plenty of her own struggles to deal with. Maybe that was obvious...and maybe it was rude of me to think this way, but I couldn’t help but feel a certain sense of kinship with her.

Koganezaki shook her head. “Look at me—it’s like I brought you here to vent to you. I’m supposed to be listening to *your* worries, not the other way around.”

“It’s fine, really!” I said. “I want to hear more, actually!”

“I would *really* rather not. I’ll tell you more...when we get to know each other a little better, I suppose.”

It seemed a line had been drawn. I was a little disappointed, but I also had to admit that she had a point. I had to focus on the problem in front of me and not let myself get sidetracked by new distractions. Plus...coming here had brought my sisters back to the front of my mind. It had brought back my desire to go back to the way they used to be—to the way *we* used to be.

Before long, our food arrived. We took turns getting up to grab drinks from the drink bar and made lighthearted small talk as we enjoyed our lunch. This was my first time eating with Koganezaki, of course, and I was a little bit nervous about that, but before I knew it, I found myself enjoying the experience too much to fixate on that. Maybe this was just my imagination, but it seemed to me that she was enjoying herself as well. *She said she lives alone... Maybe I should invite her out to eat again someday, if I get the chance.*

“So, then, I think it’s about time for us to get to the point.”

“R-Right, yeah!”

Needless to say, the good times couldn’t last forever, and in fact they ended very abruptly. We’d finished our meals and were sipping cups of oolong tea when the conversation, by necessity, turned to the reason why I’d called Koganezaki out in the first place.

“Just so you know, all that I heard from Emma was that you’d ‘committed hara-kiri.’”

“*Hara-kiri?!’*”

“Yes, hara-kiri. Really. I didn’t take it *literally*, of course, but it’s a pretty unsettling thing to hear no matter *how* you interpret it, don’t you think? And even more so considering that Emma was the one using the phrase, considering she was raised abroad.”

“Y-Yeah, tell me about it,” I agreed.

“And of course, by the time I arrived, Emma was gone and you were sitting

around in a daze, like usual... I suppose I should just be glad I didn't have to deal with the worst-case scenario, really," Koganezaki said, then took a slightly resigned sip of tea.

I felt a little bad for what I was about to ask for, considering the trouble she'd already gone through, but I was in no position to balk, even if I *was* grasping at straws. "I was hoping that you could teach me about what it means to be a *true* big sister, Koganezaki!" I said, biting the bullet and going for it.

"You...*what?*" Koganezaki countered with an incredulous scowl.

"I *know* it's super weird! But Emma just kept talking about how amazing of an elder sister you are, and I think you're an amazing person too, so I just had to ask!" I frantically explained.

"Setting aside anything Emma might have said, I'd really prefer if you'd rein in your compliments a little," Koganezaki grumbled.

"I have two little sisters! One of them's two years younger than me, and the other's three years younger!"

"Oh, so you're just moving the conversation along, then? I see how it is."

I explained how my little sisters were just the cutest, best siblings I could ask for. I told her about how Sakura was going through a bit of a rebellious streak, but was super nice at heart and had been applying herself to her studies with incredible diligence. I told her about how Aoi was chipper and innocent, could always cheer me up in an instant, and had a *ton* of friends on top of it. And, finally, I told her that I'd somehow managed to make both of them really, *really* upset with me.

"Is that so?" Koganezaki flatly replied when I was finished telling my whole story.

I felt a little bad about how long it had taken—we'd ended up getting up to refill our drinks twice over the course of the tale—but I have to admit, I was a little disappointed by how blasé her reaction was.

"Well, then," she continued, "can I go home now?"

"*No!*" I shouted. *Koganezaki, please, I'm counting on you here! You're my last*

hope! I'll be completely doomed if you leave now! “In for a penny, in for a pound, right?!”

“In this case, it feels like you snatched the penny out of my hand in the first place.”

“But you’re the one who took out your wallet, right?!”

“Touché, I suppose... Actually, I’m surprised by how smoothly you carried on that metaphor.”

“Don’t go trying to confuse me with compliments! It’s not going to get me off topic this time!”

“I was actually being sincere,” Koganezaki sighed, then stood up with her now-empty glass.

It seemed it was oolong tea refill time: round three! I quickly drained my own drink and stood up with her.

“You know you don’t have to match me glass for glass, right?” Koganezaki commented.

“Yes, I do! You might pay your tab and slip away if I let you go on your own,” I replied.

“Oh. I hadn’t even considered that,” said Koganezaki with a thoughtful nod. She almost sounded impressed, actually. Then she picked out a new glass, filled it with ice, and poured in coffee afterward.

Iced coffee! Now that’s an adult’s drink if I’ve ever seen one! “Maybe I’ll try some coffee too,” I said.

“If you’ve never had it before, I’d recommend against it,” said Koganezaki. “We’re about to have a less-than-pleasant conversation, right? You wouldn’t want to form an association between this discussion and coffee—you’ll end up flashing back to here every time you drink it.”

“H-Huh, okay,” I said. She actually did have a pretty decent point, so I got myself another iced oolong tea instead, then followed her back to our table.

“So then,” Koganezaki began, “to start, I appreciate the fact that you’re obnoxiously obsessed with your sisters.”

“Oh, *you!*”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“Okay, but being obsessed with my sisters is a big deal for me! It’s part of my identity!”

“Well, if that’s the life you want to live, I suppose that’s your prerogative. I didn’t intend it as an *insult* either, anyway,” said Koganezaki. She really *was* living up to the “ideal elder sister” image that Emma had prepared me for! Talk about understanding! “So then, I assume your goal is to make up with your little sisters?”

“Right!” I replied, then hesitated. “Or, well...it’s not like *I* have any complaints about *them*. I’m totally in the wrong, so it’s more like I want them to forgive me...”

“What on earth did you *do*, anyway?”

“Ah. Well, umm, I mean...”

“I appreciate that it might be hard for you to admit, but I’m not going to be able to help if I don’t have context.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” I groaned.

Even having admitted that, though, I couldn’t exactly come out and admit that I was two-timing the Sacrosanct to *Koganezaki*, of all people! She’d *definitely* flip out at me! Actually, her flipping out would be the *best-case* scenario! Koganezaki was the vice president of the Sacrosanct’s fan club. If she learned that I was secretly going out with Yuna and Rinka—especially considering that our relationship would look an awful lot like me cheating from society’s perspective—there’s absolutely no way I *wouldn’t* instantly become public enemy number one in her eyes.

The only reason a background rando like me was able to get away with being around the Sacrosanct and *only* get disparaging glances and irritated tongue-clicks in response was because Koganezaki had been doing her best to keep the rest of Yuna and Rinka’s fans in check. If she decided I wasn’t worthy of the two of them, I had no doubts that my lifestyle would take a sudden and dramatic turn for the worse. And most importantly of all...I’d lose a wonderful friendship

I'd only just made recently: my friendship with Koganezaki herself.

"Uggh," I groaned, at a loss.

"Hazama," said Koganezaki, "I understand that this is probably a *very* difficult subject for you, but I need you to tell me *something*. You can leave out the details—just give me whatever broad strokes you're comfortable with admitting. I'm sure I'll be able to help *somehow*."

"You'd do that for me...?"

"You said it yourself—in for a penny, in for a pound, right?"

"Right... Right!" I said.

How is she this nice, anyway? I thought to myself. She was giving me a look of pure, earnest attentiveness, and it hurt to know that I'd have to bend the truth and keep secrets from her, but I also knew that it would be *way* better for both of us than telling her the complete truth. Fortunately, I knew just what to do.

"S-So...a friend of mine has a problem!!!"

"Huh?!" Koganezaki gaped at me. "Oh...oh, of course. If that's how you want to do this, then by all means, go on."

"My friend has sisters, right? Two of them!"

"Color me surprised."

"This all happened right when summer vacation was just starting. I—er, *she* had somewhere to go early in the morning. Her sisters caught her leaving, though, and started questioning her about whether she was going out on a date."

"A date? Interesting."

"She denied it right away. She said she was going out to meet with her friends."

"Right."

"But the truth is—she really *was* going out on a date!!!"

"Wait, *what*?!" Koganezaki yelled.

Whoa, I didn't expect her to be this surprised! B-But it's fine! I said this is all about my friend—she has no idea it was really me! It'll be just fine! “So she went out on her date and had a blast,” I continued, “but then...it turned out her sisters happened to see her when she was out and about!”

“W-Wait just a moment,” said Koganezaki. “Since when were *you* in a relationship?!”

“Huh?! N-No, I mean, this is about my *friend*, not me,” I stammered.

“Right...of course. It slipped my mind,” Koganezaki said, then took a few deep breaths. “Go on, then.”

“Well, now it looks like her little sisters were really upset about my friend lying to them.”

“I suppose they're as obsessed with her as she is with them,” Koganezaki muttered.

“But it's not what it looks like, okay?! It's not like she *wanted* to lie to them! She just didn't know how to tell them... I mean, if they knew she was dating a girl, they'd probably think she was a freak, and that'd make her super sad...”

“‘Dating a girl’?”

“They really *were* just friends, in the beginning! But just recently, my friend's friend asked her out, and they ended up in a different sort of relationship... I—*she's* kinda had her head in the clouds ever since.”

“‘Just recently’? ‘A different sort of relationship’? Hazama...” Koganezaki said, her brow furrowed and her hand resting in her chin. She looked a little intense all of a sudden.

“Are you saying...you're dating one of the Sacrosanct?”

My heart did such an intense somersault that for a second, I thought it had literally exploded.

“Wh-Wh-What're you talking about?!” I babbled. *What the heck?! I said I was talking about a friend! How did she figure out this was all about me?! I-It's okay,*

though. Settle down, Yotsuba Hazama! Koganezaki's just a little confused! She just got mixed up since I'm the one telling the story, for sure! "Remember what I said, Koganezaki? This isn't about *me*, it's about my *fr*—"

"You do remember that you called me out to talk about *your* problem? Suddenly claiming that you were telling a story about a friend did absolutely nothing whatsoever to hide the fact that you were talking about yourself. If anything, it made it *more* obvious."

"Oh... Huh?"

"Do... Do you *really* not understand this? All right, then. Let me put it in simpler terms," said Koganezaki. She gave me a long, probing look, then said the most cruel and merciless thing she possibly could've. "You don't even *have* any friends other than those two, do you?"

"*Gaaugh?!*" I screeched as her merciless words nailed me *right* in the heart.

"I feel bad for saying this, but honestly, I'm more curious about *this* than I am about your problem with your sisters. I'm sure that's something you can appreciate, Hazama," said Koganezaki.

"Uh... Ah, I mean, uh, *uhh*..."

"Don't tell me...you were *already* dating when the recent incident began?"

"Well, I...er..."

"I'll take that as a 'yes,' then," said Koganezaki. I'd heard that she'd been given the nickname "The Empress" by her classmates, and the frigid, piercing stare she had fixed on me made me really understand how she'd earned the title. Even if I *didn't* answer her questions, she could suss out the truth from my tiniest of reactions! "Unbelievable... You *lied* to me?!"

"N-No! I didn't mean to—"

"But you *did*! And you never dropped the innocent act that whole time... You really *were* the reason why they weren't getting along, weren't you?!"

Oh jeez, oh jeez! She knows! She figured it out really, really easily! I have to find a way to recover from this, or it might cause trouble for Yuna and Rinka, even! But what am I supposed to—

“Well...I suppose I should just be glad I found out, in the end,” Koganezaki continued.

“Uh.”

“I won’t pretend that I’m completely satisfied with how all of this happened, but who you or anyone else decides to go out with isn’t any of my business. I *would* like to get a grasp of the situation before the second semester starts, though, in the interest of not having to solve the same problem all over again...and of course, we can think up a plan to solve your issue with your sisters at the same time.”

“K-Koganezaki...!” I stammered.

“For the record, this isn’t over after I help you!” she continued. “You’ve worked up quite the debt to me after all of this, and I fully intend to have you pay me back someday.”

“Th-Thank you so much!” I shouted. I’d been prepared for her to completely abandon me—not *this*! *She really is an incredibly nice person!*

“Of course, I suppose there *is* always a chance that this was all some stupid fantasy on your part and none of it is true,” Koganezaki added offhandedly.

“I know, right?” I said. “It really does sound like one big fantasy... Who would’ve thought that those two would go for *me*?”

“...”

“H-Hey? Koganezaki?”

“...‘Those two’?”

“Huh?”

“You told me that ‘your friend’ was asked out by *her* friend a moment ago, didn’t you?”

“Umm...?”

Koganezaki frowned. She looked like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing—like she didn’t *want* to believe it—and her expression plus the words she spoke sent a chill down my spine. “I jumped to the conclusion that either

Momose or Aiba had asked you out. It seemed natural. That would mean that their recent friction was on account of one of them having gotten a girlfriend and the other becoming jealous since they had less time together as a result. A conflict, certainly, but a good-natured one in the grand scheme of things.”

She was speaking out loud, and perfectly clearly, but I could still tell that she was talking to herself, not me. She didn’t give me the chance to fit a word in edgewise, so I kind of just sat there and panicked.

“So. Hazama?”

“Y-Yes?!”

“Who was it that asked you out? Momose, Aiba...or both of them?”

“*Eep!*” I squealed. I’d seen the question coming, but actually getting confronted by it still made me lose my cool.

Naturally, that fact didn’t escape Koganezaki’s notice. “The thought that you were dating just *one* of them was already a shock, honestly. But you know, Hazama...I’ve developed a rather preposterous theory.”

“I, umm... I...”

“Judging by that response, I don’t have to bother explaining my theory to you, do I?”

It was hard to believe, but I was going through almost exactly the same experience now as I had earlier on with my sisters. Even more astonishingly, despite this being the second time in the same day, the sense of despair was no less powerful. I felt my blood run cold, and Koganezaki smiled at me. It was a sweet, pleasant smile...but it didn’t reach her eyes. It was a smile with enough pressure behind it to flatten you.

“I’ll get straight to the point, Hazama,” she said. “You’re two-timing the Sacrosanct, aren’t you?”

It felt like my limbs had gone numb. I could barely breathe. My heart was pounding, but the noise seemed to be coming from somewhere far away—like I was hearing it from underwater...

And so, for the second time that day, I was cast down into the depths of hell.

Chapter 4: My Saviors

“L-Look, K-Koganezaki, I, umm,” I frantically stammered. I *knew* she was about to come out swinging—the only real question left was how.

This just *had* to happen right after it *finally* seemed like we were starting to get along! Right after I’d learned all sorts of ways in which she was actually a great person! I was very confident I’d never get to see her smile again. It was a given, honestly. After all, I’d completely taken advantage of her kindness, deceiving her and failing to show her so much as a shred of sincerity!

Koganezaki didn’t say anything, at first. She just sat there, staring at me. If I had to describe her expression, I’d say she looked mostly serious, but I couldn’t help but think she was glaring at me too. I was coming to a painfully personal understanding of what it felt like to be a deer in someone’s headlights.

“I, ah, umm,” I babbled. *Th-This is terrifying! I have to say something! I have to!* My mind was racing, but unfortunately, it was doing so in circles.

“...Pff!”

“Huh?”

“Heh... Aha ha ha, ha ha ha ha *ha!*”

Uh? Wait...wh-what?! For some reason, Koganezaki...burst out in a fit of uncontrollable laughter?! And I mean full-on, stomach-clutching, gut-busting laughter! But why, though?!

“U-Umm... Koganezaki...?” I said.

“Heh, aha ha ha... Hazama, your...your *face* just now, it... Pff, ha ha ha ha!”

Wait, could it be...? Does she think all that two-timing stuff was just a joke?! Th-That has to be it, right?! I mean, me two-timing a couple of girls isn’t even slightly realistic, least of all when those girls are Yuna and Rinka! Nobody would ever believe a story like that coming from someone like me!



“Oh, to be clear, it’s not that I don’t believe you,” said Koganezaki before coming down with yet another fit of giggles. “Hee hee hee! You’re just the *funniest* person, Hazama, really!”

Wait, so she does believe I’m two-timing them?! Then what the heck is she laughing about?

“Honestly,” she continued, “this is the first time I’ve met someone who’s *actually* doing something like that in real life! And that person is a *high school girl*, and one who wouldn’t stand out in a crowd no matter *how* small the crowd was! And that’s not even *starting* on how you’re one of the least self-confident people I’ve ever met, or how the people you’re two-timing are a pair that the entire student body looks up to... I’d say it’s like something out of a novel, but it’s so outlandish, most *novelists* would probably consider it too unrealistic to get away with!”

“R-Right,” I mumbled uncomfortably.

“I just—I just *can’t*,” Koganezaki said. “Every time I think it through, it just gets funnier and funnier! Aha ha ha ha... I’m sorry, I think I need a minute...”

Koganezaki’s hysterical giggling fit didn’t seem likely to end any time soon, and rather than sit there in awkward exasperation, I decided to go hit up the drink bar for a refill while she got it out of her system. I got her a refill too while I was at it, of course. When I got back with two full glasses of oolong tea, however, she was still slumped over on the table, her shoulders quivering with poorly repressed mirth. My mental image of her was undergoing a dramatic revision—who would’ve thought she was the sort of person who’d really laugh her head off like this?

“I’m...I’m sorry,” Koganezaki gasped. “I’m fine now, really...”

“O-Okay, great,” I replied.

Koganezaki took a few loud, dramatic breaths, then seemed to regain some semblance of control. When she finally managed to sit up straight again, I noticed that she’d literally brought herself to the verge of tears from laughing so hard. She was also smirking at me, by the way.

“I was *positive* you’d hold me in contempt for this,” I admitted.

“Hee hee... Yes, well, that’s fair enough,” Koganezaki replied. “What you’re doing *is* perfectly reprehensible, from my perspective. There’s certainly an argument to be made that it’s contemptible.”

“Ugh?!” I grunted. “Y-Yeah, I guess it is...” *Well, that’s one topic I definitely shouldn’t have brought up! I think I’m gonna cry...*

“That said,” Koganezaki continued, “the fact that it’s contemptible doesn’t mean I’ll *actually* hold you in contempt for it. Besides, your scummy two-timing doesn’t actually run contrary to my objective. In fact, it might even make things easier for me.”

“Your objective? Umm...you mean, like, your fan-club work?” I asked.

“That’s right,” she said. “The only reason why I’m subjecting myself to the many annoyances of being their vice president is because it allows me to control the fan base on the whole, ensure they never end up *too* united in their opinions and the causes they champion, and prevent as much unnecessary conflict from breaking out as I can.”

“Oh—you mean, like, all the rules that the club has and stuff? You’ve been using all those to protect Yuna and Rinka from their fans...?”

“Right. Though to be clear, the rather excessive degree to which they’ve ended up put on a saintly pedestal and the unnecessarily *passionate* nature of the club’s culture wasn’t my doing. You can thank the president for *those* policies.”

It occurred to me at that point that I didn’t actually know *who* the fan club’s president was. I’d heard stories about them running events themed around the Sacrosanct without their knowledge, and distributing candid photos of them, and stuff like that. *Surely Koganezaki knows them, right...? Wait, no, I’m getting way off track!*

“As things stand, the fan club is in a relatively good place,” said Koganezaki. “The president may *look* like an irresponsible troublemaker, certainly, but I have the situation firmly enough under control that I can prevent any problems before they arise. I suppose you could say that the president dangles the carrot before the club members’ eyes, while I wield the stick.”

“Oh, huh,” I said, visualizing Koganezaki walking around with a stick...which actually suited her pretty well, though my mental image also turned it into one that made a really loud noise when it hit you, but didn’t actually hurt at all.

“My greatest fear was that Momose and Aiba’s friendship would break down, prompting the fan club to descend into obnoxious factional infighting, or that somebody new would join the club, seize the reins of leadership from me, and do something to cause the two of them harm. Considering how attention-grabbing the two of them tend to be, it wouldn’t have been strange if something along those lines happened even *without* the fan club around to instigate it, but miraculously enough, things have ended up in a certain state of equilibrium and nothing disastrous has happened so far.”

“Equilibrium...?” I repeated, cocking my head.

“Right. The two of them have known each other since childhood, and are each the other’s best friend. They both understand and respect each other, as well. This might not be the most positive way to put it, but their relationship seemed to have more or less hit a point of stagnation...and that fact resulted in the Sacrosanct’s foundation.”

Koganezaki looked a little distant all of a sudden—like she was gazing at something that wasn’t really there. There was a hint of nostalgia in her eyes, as well as...admiration, maybe?

“That stagnation didn’t last, though,” Koganezaki continued. “They may have staked out their perfect little chunk of territory, but it was only a matter of time before an invasive species showed up to throw off the ecosystem’s balance. That’s you, by the way.”

“What am I, a crayfish?!”

“Or possibly a largemouth bass.”

Wow! Now that was a snappy comeback!

“Of course, at first, you seemed like you were *just* a good friend to them. You didn’t show any signs of prioritizing one of them over the other—the relationships between you three seemed to have settled into a remarkably balanced triangle. The thought that you’d end up *dating* them is a shock, of

course, but you dating *both* of them would lead to a state of affairs where that balance doesn't actually end up being disrupted. Don't you think?"

"I...I guess, probably...?" I said hesitantly.

"Of course, from a moral perspective, I have all sorts of questions, and I certainly never would have even considered the concept of you two-timing them," Koganezaki continued. "In a certain sense of the word, I'm impressed."

"That wasn't a compliment at all, was it?!"

"It was, actually. I've even come around to respecting you, to an extent. The fact that both of them asked you out, that you ran with the lunatic idea to *date* both of them, and that you've somehow managed to preserve the balance between them and give them both the affection they desire from you in equal measure... I have to assume that you have *several* screws loose, if not missing altogether. I feel like I've witnessed the birth of a two-timing prodigy."

"The birth of the worst prodigy in human history!!!" I exclaimed. Koganezaki was clearly having fun pushing my buttons, and I wound up smiling along with her in spite of myself.

"So then, Yotsuba Hazama the natural-born womanizing scumbag..." Koganezaki began.

"W-Wow, mean!" I cut in.

"I think it's safe to guess at this point that the reason why your little sisters are upset with you has something to do with your little two-timing venture getting exposed. Am I right?"

"Are you a *psychic*?!"

"No. It's an obvious guess. It's blatant enough that even I immediately leapt to the conclusion. Let me guess again: you went out on dates with both of them, failed to take any precautions, and your sisters happened to catch you in the act."

"..."

"Huh? What, *really*?" said Koganezaki, recoiling in undisguised horror. "Surely even *you* know that if you're going to break the rules, you need to stay on guard

and make sure you don't attract attention to yourself in the process? *Especially* when the people you're breaking the rules *with* are as attention-grabbing as the Sacrosanct!"

"Can't argue with that," I groaned.

"Now I'm starting to worry that somebody from school might've seen you... Though then again, I'm sure I would've been the first person to hear about that if it *did* happen, so probably not. Miraculously, I think we've been spared that particular disaster."

Ooof—she just keeps hitting me where it hurts, over and over! Getting called out on the first guess *once* had been bad enough! I resolved to be a *lot* more careful from now on.

"Oh, there I go again, off on another digression," said Koganezaki. "For now, I have one major question for you: what do *you* want to happen next?"

"What do you mean by that...?" I asked.

"Your two-timing has been exposed to your sisters. That means that your options are quite limited, all around. The first that springs to mind would be to terminate your relationships with the Sacrosanct and swear to your sisters that you'll never flout society's standards like that again. That...*might* lead to them forgiving you."

"That would mean breaking up with Yuna and Rinka, though, wouldn't it...?" I asked.

"Well, yes. I have to imagine that your sisters are upset by the idea of their older sister two-timing on a basic... You know, you could at least *try* not to look quite so put off by this."

I hadn't realized it myself, but apparently my opinion of her suggestion had shown through in my expression. *No way! I don't wanna break up with them! I can't!*

"Well then, let's move on to the second option," said Koganezaki. "You could give up on your sisters. That would mean accepting the fact that they think you're two-timing trash and living with the knowledge that they hold you in contempt."

“Ugggh,” I groaned. It *did*, unfortunately, seem inevitable that if I was going to keep my relationships with Yuna and Rinka as they stood, it would end up that way. I was faced with an impossible dilemma: my girlfriends or my family?

How could I possibly choose one over the other?! Yuna and Rinka were incredibly important to me. They were my girlfriends, and I loved them. But Sakura and Aoi were *also* incredibly precious to me! We’d been together since they were born, and I’d been watching over them that whole time. I might never have been able to do much of anything for them, and maybe I *wasn’t* even close to a model older sister, but the idea of being estranged from them—of never having them treat me like their sister ever again...it was just too much to take.

“Sakura... Aoi...” I muttered.

“Your sisters really are important to you, aren’t they? Important enough to bring you to tears, anyway,” commented Koganezaki.

“Huh?” I said, then realized that I really *had* been crying. I knew that sobbing it up wasn’t going to accomplish anything, but there I was, doing it anyway. It felt like I was running away from my problems, and I didn’t really like that thought at all.

“Here, use this,” said Koganezaki, offering me a handkerchief.

“I’m sorry—thanks,” I said, reluctantly accepting it.

“You’re a wonderful sister, you know that?” Koganezaki said as I dabbed the tears from my eyes.

I paused, shocked. “Huh...? Th-That’s not true at all! I mean, you heard what I —”

“I’m not talking about anything you may or may not have done,” Koganezaki said, cutting me off. “I’m talking about the fact that you really do care for them from the bottom of your heart. That much, I can say for certain,” she added. She had an incredibly kind look in her eyes, though behind that kindness there was a certain hint of envy as well that caught me off guard. “I have a brother,” she continued. “He’s much older than me, though.”

“Huh?!” I yelped. “So then—you’re *not* an older sister?!”

“Didn’t Emma tell you? I’m my family’s youngest, with all the accompanying stereotypes. I’m not proud to admit it, but I was as demanding as could be when I was little.”

“Oh, huh,” I replied.

“Of course, this isn’t about me, so that’s neither here nor there. The point I was getting at is that I’m quite certain my brother’s never been brought to tears by the thought of me. I’m not saying that he’s distant or coldhearted, to be clear—just that *you’re* exceptionally close with and compassionate toward your siblings.”

“Koganezaki,” I muttered. I didn’t know what else to say.

“I’m sure your sisters are glad to have you as their family...though of course, that’s just my impression from an outsider’s perspective,” Koganezaki added.

I was so happy to hear it, I very nearly broke down in tears all over again.

“Now then—the third option,” Koganezaki continued.

“Huh...?” I grunted.

“You could convince your sisters to approve of your two-timing.”

“Huh...huhuuuuuh?!”

“If you can talk them into shrugging off your love life and accepting that there’s nothing to be done about it, you may be able to preserve *all* of your relationships at once.”

In other words, if everything went well, I could have the best of both worlds. It was an incredibly simple option, but also an incredibly wild one—so much so that even Koganezaki, the girl who’d proposed it, was smiling in a way that made me wonder if the whole thing was a sarcastic joke.

“In the worst case, the situation could deteriorate even farther than it already has, and I don’t have any specific ideas about *how* you could convince them...but I also can’t rule out the possibility.”

“It’s not totally impossible...” I muttered.

“Most likely, the more affection your little sisters feel for you, the more

possible it is that the plan could be pulled off,” Koganezaki said. “That said, the more they like you, the harder putting it into action will become.”

“Huh...? Wait, what? Why?” I asked.

“Think about it this way,” said Koganezaki. “If your sisters don’t really care about you at all, they’ll probably give up on you long before you put any real effort into the solution, right? You’ll be asking them to accept your two-timing, after all—that’s a pretty outrageous thing to say to someone. If they love you, however, then I believe they’ll want to do whatever they can to understand you, no matter how unreasonable you’re being.”

“R-Right, that makes sense,” I said.

“The thing is, though, that the more they care about you, the more dedicated they’ll be to convincing you *not* to pursue a relationship as absurd as the one you’ll be explaining to them. They’ll try to bring you back to your senses.”

I couldn’t remember where, but I’d definitely been told before that a *real* friend doesn’t turn a blind eye to your mistakes—they call you out on them, and help you realize you’re in the wrong. I thought about it, and realized that if Sakura or Aoi were doing something that I was convinced was a huge mistake, I’d definitely do my utmost to persuade them to see the light, no matter how upset with me it made them. I wouldn’t be able to wave their decision off *because* they were so important to me.

“Of course,” Koganezaki said, “no matter *how* much affection they have for you, you can only spend so long obstinately insisting that you *have* to date two girls at once before you’ve burned through all the credit they’re willing to give you.”

“Ugh,” I grunted. That would mean burning the bridge for good and rendering any chance at repairing my relationship with them impossible. I’d already pretty much hit bottom, but it turned out there was an even *deeper*, even more hellish sub-bottom beneath me. “I know...but I’ll do it anyway,” I said. “I know that the way I’m thinking about this is wishy-washy, and I know that it’s not the sort of perspective that anyone will praise me for...but when I really think about it, it’s not like people have praised me for the way I think about stuff all that much before now, anyway!”

“That’s a very *you* way of picking yourself back up,” said Koganezaki with an exasperated smile.

I really *had* picked myself up a little, though, and the oppressive weight that had been bearing down on me felt a little lighter as a result. Knowing there was a path I could take that just might lead me to a future where I had the best of both worlds was *way* better than spending all day fruitlessly racking my mind for a solution that would never come. Sure, following that path to the end seemed all but impossible, but I was set on going for it anyway. I wouldn’t give up, no matter how much of a scumbag it made me look like!

“I’ll do it!” I shouted. “I’ll two-time my family *and* my girlfriends!”

“That’s the worst possible way you could have phrased that, Hazama,” sighed Koganezaki.

Okay, yeah, I might’ve hyped myself up so hard I glitched out my brain for a second there...b-but anyway, I have a plan! I’m doing this!



Koganezaki and I kept chatting for a little while, and eventually, I paused to send a message to the group chat I had with Yuna and Rinka. Its contents were pretty simple and to the point: I asked them if we could meet up to talk sometime soon.

“I’d recommend against mentioning my involvement to the two of them—and to your sisters, needless to say,” said Koganezaki shortly before we went our separate ways. “The more people who get wrapped up in this issue, the more complicated resolving it will become. But, well, if anything goes wrong, you can feel free to text me anytime.”

I had a feeling she was mostly offering out of concern that if my troubles escalated too far, they could throw off the Sacrosanct’s equilibrium, but I was still really grateful. I had to admit: I still didn’t have the slightest clue how I was going to get Sakura and Aoi to sign off on the relationship between the three of us. Still, though, I understood now that forging ahead on an uncertain path was better than doing nothing and regretting the heck out of it later on down the line. Even if it *did* pose the risk of plunging me into an even deeper pit of hell than before, I couldn’t bring myself to give up on any of them—and I *did* know

what my very first step would have to be, considering that.

“I am so, so sorryyyyyyyyyy!!!”

The *instant* I stepped into Rinka’s home’s entryway—wham! I was on the floor in a full-on, head-to-the-ground bow of deepest apology!

“What on—Yotsuba, what are you *doing*?!” Rinka yelled, her eyes widening, as she stepped up to greet me.

Yuna, who had already arrived and had come out along with her, had her smartphone out and pointed in my direction. I was pretty sure I heard a shutter snap come from it too. “Look, look!” she squealed. “Our girlfriend’s bowing to us! Surely you’re not gonna let a sight like this slip past you!”

“Wait, are you taking *pictures*?” asked Rinka.

“Well, I mean, just *look* how adorable she is! See?” said Yuna, showing Rinka her phone’s screen.

“Oh—okay, yeah, you’re right,” said Rinka with a nod. “Nice shot, Yuna. Send that to me later, okay?”

“Roger that!”

Judging by how casually that exchange had played out, my girlfriends were *not* taking this super seriously. *They, umm, are listening to me, right?*

“Well, how did you *expect* us to take this?” said Yuna when I voiced my doubts. “You just did this super over-the-top apology out of nowhere! I don’t even know what you’re apologizing *for*!”

“Ugh,” I grunted. She was right, of course. I definitely should’ve explained what I was talking about *before* leaping to the conclusion.

“Why don’t you come inside for now?” suggested Rinka. “My parents are at work, so you can make yourself at home. Actually...now that I think about it, it’s a *really* good thing they aren’t around. I have *no* idea how I’d explain all of *that* to them.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “Sorry...and, umm, thanks.” I followed the two of them into Rinka’s living room, where I found her table covered in the various homework assignments that we’d been given to complete over summer break. “You were

working on your homework, Rinka?" I said. "I'm sorry for interrupting."

"You're not interrupting at all," Rinka reassured me. "I was only working on it because I didn't have anything better to do."

"You'd be surprised how diligent Rinka is about this sorta stuff. Personally, I'm the type who gets it all done at once," commented Yuna.

I took that to mean *she* hadn't started on her summer homework at all. I was in the same boat, by the way—I always ended up saving my homework till the last week of break and moaning and groaning as I pushed through it all at once.

"Oh, but maybe I should get mine done early this time?" said Yuna. "I could totally imagine you asking me to let you copy my work, after all."

"I wouldn't do that! Seriously!" I protested. I would've *wanted* to, don't get me wrong, but I knew for a fact that Yuna and Rinka would have way too high a percentage of correct answers for that to work. I'd get busted before I knew it! I knew that for a fact...because Miki had already warned me not to even think about trying it. Yup. That sure did happen. "A-Anyway, I, umm...I have something important I need to tell the two of you about," I continued.

"You sound really serious, and that gives me a really bad feeling about where this is going," said Rinka.

"Right?" agreed Yuna with a nod.

What an overwhelming display of trust in my assessment of the situation! Too bad they had to show it over something this unpleasant! I felt pretty bad about *not* betraying their expectations in this particular instance, but I still had to be honest and fess up about the fact that our two-timing arrangement had been exposed to my little sisters.

"Oooh," said Yuna when I was finished.

"That's, umm," Rinka began, then paused. "I'm not really sure what to say about that."

She and Yuna exchanged awkward glances, and it occurred to me that they might be worried it was *their* fault that things had gotten awkward within my family, on account of the fact that they were the ones who'd approved of my

two-timing.

“You two shouldn’t feel guilty about this at all,” I quickly clarified. “This wouldn’t have happened if I’d just been more careful and thought things through...plus, it’s *my* family and all.” Rinka and Yuna had families of their own, of course. They were both only children, but if their parents learned about what the three of us were doing, it seemed inevitable that they’d worry about their kids. In other words, all three of us were dealing with the same risks—I was just the one who’d happened to actually screw up.

“Don’t try to take all the responsibility for this on your own, Yotsuba,” said Rinka. “This isn’t just *your* problem—it’s all of our problem, and we should deal with it together. Right, Yuna?”

“Naturally!” said Yuna with a nod. “Think about it this way—you wouldn’t turn a blind eye if either of *us* were in trouble, would you? Well, it’s the same for us!”

The two of them were doing their best to reassure me, but I also noted a certain tone of unease in their voices. It didn’t take me long to figure out what was bothering them. “So, umm...I know this is going to sound selfish, considering the circumstances and all...but I want you to know that I want to keep dating the two of you, no matter what happens!”

“Are you sure?” asked Yuna. “You know what that could mean, right?”

“Yeah, but I can’t live without you two anymore!!!” I shouted. From society’s perspective, our relationship might have looked abnormal and immoral, but I couldn’t possibly bring myself to go back to the time before I knew them—no, I couldn’t even bring myself to go back to the time when we were just friends. And knowing how I felt about them, I didn’t want to make *them* worry about *my* feelings for so much as a second!

“Oh, Yotsuba,” Rinka sighed with relief.

“Oh, thank *god*,” Yuna said, then let out a sigh of her own. “You were being so *polite* and *serious*, I was positive you were going to pull the same stunt on us as you did back at the amusement park and say you wanted to break up again, you know?!”

“Oh... S-sorry!” I said.

“You don’t have to apologize or anything,” said Yuna. “It’s just.../ can’t live without *you* anymore either... I was worried, that’s all.”

“I was too, of course,” said Rinka. “I want—no, both of us want to stay with you forever. But still, though—are you really okay with how things are going? With your sisters, I mean.”

“No,” I said with a shake of my head. “That’s not okay at all. I want to make up with them.” Yuna and Rinka looked a little surprised at that. I had a pretty good idea of what they were thinking, but I was resolved. “That’s why I’m going to convince them to accept our relationships!!!” I declared with as much force and confidence as I could manage.

“*Oh*, I see now,” said Yuna. “That’s just like you, Yotsuba.”

“She *was* so set on dating both of us that she tried to do it in secret at first, after all,” added Rinka. “I guess we *were* the ones who asked her out, but still, it says a lot about her.”

They both seemed a little exasperated, but everything was A-okay! They were smiling again, after all! “So, I’ve been thinking about *how* I can make them accept our whole thing,” I said.

“Right,” said Yuna.

“Okay,” said Rinka.

“And I was hoping you two could help me come up with something!!!”

Silence fell.

“W-Well, that, uh... I guess that’s just like you too, huh?” Rinka eventually said.

Oh god, they’re super weirded out! It’s really obvious! I know Rinka was trying to help, but I think that comment just made it even worse... But okay, yeah, maybe this is just like me! I’m a girl who’s never had a plan or a clue for as long as I’ve lived!

“We’d be happy to help you think things through, of course,” said Yuna, “but to start, could you tell us a little about what sort of people your little sisters

are?”

“Good idea,” said Rinka. “You’ve brought them up plenty of times, but we’ve never actually met them, so some more information could come in handy.”

“Gotcha!” I replied. “Okay, then, let me start by telling you *all* about Sakura...”



“...And that concludes my report on the infinite charms of Sakura and Aoi, the pride and joy of the Hazama household!”

“Y-Yes, fantastic,” said Yuna. “I...*suppose* I understand...probably?”

“Right...” said Rinka. “Though really, what I understand more than anything else now is that you really, *really* love your sisters, Yotsuba.”

“D’aww, you’re too much!” I said. Rinka’s impression of my sisterly nature was remarkably similar to what Koganezaki had told me earlier that day, but I still thought it was only natural for a big sister to be that way.

“She really does,” said Yuna. “So much that I’m actually a little jealous.”

“Huh?” I blinked. “Wait, is caring a ton about your sisters a strike *against* you on the girlfriend scale?!” I’d seen characters in TV dramas get portrayed as caring just a little *too* much about their families, and I’d seen those characters get treated as a problem for the rest of the cast, but it never occurred to me until that very moment that Yuna and Rinka might feel similarly about *me*!

“No, I wouldn’t say that at all,” said Rinka. “Actually, seeing how much you care for your sisters is making me want to meet them myself.”

“Like, I *said* I was jealous, I know, but, well...” said Yuna, trying to find the right words. “It’s not a *serious* thing? It just happens when you go on and on about how much you care about girls who you’re *not* going out with, and I can’t help it... It’s not like I’m *upset* with you or your sisters or anything, and neither is Rinka! Don’t get the wrong idea about that, okay?!”

Oh, thank goodness. I’d spent a solid thirty minutes talking nonstop about my sisters, and I was starting to get worried that I’d made them think I was a huge pain in the butt in the process. *I guess I wouldn’t have had to give them that whole spiel if I could just find a way to let them all meet up in person, huh...?*

Actually, wait a second!

“I just had a great idea!” I shouted. “I think I know how we can get them to accept that I’m dating you two!”

“Huh? Really?” asked Rinka.

“Yeah! Long story short: we just have the two of you meet with them! Think about it—you two are *way* more incredible than I could ever express in words, but if you actually *met* with them, I’m positive they’d realize how great you are and—”

“Uhh, Yotsuba?” said Rinka before I could even finish. “That’s probably not a very good idea.”

“Huh?!”

“Yeah... Hate to say it, but I’m on Rinka’s side here,” added Yuna.

“But why?!”

“The fact that you *actually* haven’t figured this out yourself yet is, again, really like you, but... Hmm, how to say this...?” muttered Rinka as she rested her chin in her hand. “So, after hearing your story, I think we’re both under the impression that your sisters are really nice kids, and we both would *like* to be friends with them. Your explanation’s part of why we feel that way, of course—you really put your everything into it—but the biggest reason why we want to get along with them is just plain and simply because they’re *your* sisters.”

“Huh...?” I replied, not really following her logic.

“They’re our girlfriend’s family,” said Yuna. “It’d be ridiculous for us to get in a fight with them! I think it’s pretty obvious we’d want to get along with your sisters.”

That, I could understand. I felt the same way about their families.

“But your sisters don’t necessarily feel that way about us,” Rinka continued. “Actually, I think it’s downright unlikely they feel that way.”

“Huh?! Why not?!” I asked.

“Because *we’re* the reason why you’re two-timing in the first place,” said

Yuna. “I really don’t think that’d give them a very good impression of us, and if we met up with them *now*, they’d definitely come into the meeting with a major bias against us!”

“But, but,” I stammered, “*I’m* the one who’s been two-timing *you* two, aren’t I? That makes me the bad guy and you the victims! It doesn’t make any sense for them to be mad at *you* for—”

“Sorry, Yotsuba, but that’s probably not how your sisters see it,” said Rinka. “To them, we probably look like a pair of temptresses who’re deceiving their sweet, innocent sister.”

“I mean, we *did* kinda pressure you into the whole two-timing thing, when you really think about it,” added Yuna.

Ugggh... I’d thought my plan was a really good idea, but their objections were ringing unfortunately true in my ears. “Yeah, okay... Sorry for trying to talk you into something weird...”

“It’s not a *weird* idea,” said Yuna. “I mean, like we said, we *want* to meet them! It’s just prooobably a better idea for us to put that off till sometime after we’ve worked this all out.”

“Sorry we couldn’t be of more help,” added Rinka.

“No, it’s okay!” I insisted. “I’m the one who put you two on the spot by asking for help to begin with. I always go looking for someone else to pull me out of trouble as soon as I find myself in a tough spot.” This was my problem, and I was the one who’d decided that I just had to have it all, solution-wise. *Maybe it was irresponsible of me to ask them for help to begin with.*

“I was happy you asked us for help, though,” Rinka added.

“Huh?”

“Agreed!” said Yuna. “It, like, made me feel like you really trust us, you know?”

“O-Of *course* I trust you!” I exclaimed. It had taken quite a lot to get our relationship to this point, but by now, it was a given for me to tell them about things like this. They were my girlfriends, after all.

“I don’t think we’re in any position to act all high-and-mighty with you, Yotsuba,” said Rinka, “but I’m afraid that I’ll regret it if I *don’t* tell you this now, so...can I say something that might sound a little condescending?”

“Uh... S-Sure, go ahead,” I replied.

“I think...I think you should be a little more selfish sometimes, Yotsuba!”

“*Huh?!*”

“Right, that! I totally agree!”

“You too, Yuna?!” *Haven’t I already been ridiculously selfish, like, all the time with them?! I just told them about how I wanted to keep dating both of them while also getting my sisters’ affection back, right?!*

“Back when we first started going out, you’re the one who decided to date both of us, right?” said Yuna.

“Ah... W-Well, I mean,” I muttered, not really sure what to say.

“I think you can probably figure this out for yourself by now, but I was really happy when I learned that you were trying to two-time us on your own initiative! I mean, just *thinking* about getting in a real, head-to-head fight with Rinka over you... Honestly, it gives me chills.”

“Trust me, Yuna, I feel the same way,” said Rinka.

They gave each other a look, then snickered. *Oh, of course...* To everyone around them, Yuna and Rinka were the Sacrosanct—a pair who dwelled in a realm far above that which we mortals inhabited. That said, they would see each other in a very different light. They were present in each other’s earliest memories, and they each knew *exactly* what made the other incredible. In other words, they probably saw each other as their ultimate rivals.

“But then you chose *both* of us,” said Yuna. “Thanks to you, Rinka and I didn’t have to fight and neither of us ended up heartbroken. I still believe that this was the right choice for the three of us. Even if it ends up hurting your sisters’ feelings...I don’t think I’m ever going to change my mind.”

“Yuna...”

“You made the two of us happier than you know,” said Rinka. “If two-timing

us was selfish of you, then you were *right* to be selfish. I think that's true for your little sisters too. I think that being true to your feelings and letting yourself be selfish with them is the right choice."

"Rinka..." *Can I really just be more selfish like that? Can I really just get what I want...?*

"I'm sure you have a lot of things on your mind—what we think about all this, what your sisters think, and probably even more," Rinka continued. "But personally, I...no, we want you to choose an option that *you* think would be the best possible decision."

"The best possible decision..." I muttered. "Letting myself be selfish..." I was Sakura and Aoi's big sister. I was the eldest, and though I didn't know if I was particularly reliable in their eyes, I knew for a fact that I *wanted* to be. But would it really be all right for me to push that desire onto them...?

"It'll be fine," said Yuna. "And hey, if it *does* go wrong, we can just think up a new plan to try next!"

"We'll never let go of you, Yotsuba, no matter what happens. Not even if you try to shake us off!" said Rinka.

"You guys..."

I think that, deep down, I was afraid. The slightest bit of disdain from my sisters was enough to make me spiral into a cycle of blame and self-doubt, driving myself further and further into a corner until I just ran away from it all. I worried, psyched myself up again, ran off to ask other people for help, then got depressed all over again... I'd been through this whole cycle time and time again, but still, I had people who were willing to stay with me in spite of how I was. I had people whom *I* wanted to stay with too—lots of them!

"Thanks, you two... I'll make this work, you'll see!" I said. I'd imposed on Emma, Koganezaki, Yuna, *and* Rinka today, but thanks to them, it finally felt like I understood what I wanted to do *and* what would be best for me. They'd given me all the strength and courage I needed. I still wasn't sure if all of this would actually work out, but I knew that I just had to give it a shot! I'd do my best to make my selfish desires come true!

Please...let me stay as their big sister forever.

The wish I'd made what felt like ages ago suddenly popped into my mind. I never thought that I'd be wishing it again in quite *this* serious of a context... *But no, wishing won't do me any good. This is my selfish desire, and if I want it granted, I have to make it happen myself!*

I promised myself that I'd never let go of anything I wanted. I'd reclaim my relationships with Sakura and Aoi...and I'd take hold of the happiest ending I could ever imagine!

Chapter 5: Yotsuba's Steamy Sisterly Spat-Soothing Stratagem

A few days had passed since my little sisters found out about my two-timing. Yup, a few days...which *wasn't* a sign that I'd chickened out and backed down on my plan, okay?! My resolve was still exactly as strong and sincere as it had been the day I'd found it! There was just one tiny little problem, though.

Me: "Ah, Sakura! Good mor—"

Sakura: "...!" (Leaves the living room without saying a word.)

Me: "Hey, Aoi—"

Aoi: "...!" (Takes one look at me, turns around, and runs away.)

As you can see, I was more or less up a creek without a paddle. Now, the *old* me would've succumbed to heartbreak by now without a doubt, but the *new* Yotsuba was in no such danger! She wasn't going to give in to that sort of dejection! Yet! Just barely!!!

"Good morning, Yotsuba."

"Ah, morning, mom! You sure slept in today," I said as my mom sleepily plodded her way into the living room. It was almost noon, which meant she was starting her day way later than usual.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" said my mom. "My work starts in the afternoon today."

"Wait, really? I had no idea! I made you a lunch box and everything!" I replied.

"Ahh, sorry! In that case, I guess I'll take advantage of the opportunity and have lunch for breakfast."

"I don't think so," I said. "If either of us is taking advantage of this

opportunity, it'll be me! You barely ever get to eat at home, so I want to make you something nice!"

While I was lazing it up over the summer, my mom and dad—the latter of whom had already left for the day—were working as hard as they could to support us. Since my mom had the chance to take it easy for once, I wanted to let her eat something a little nicer than a fresh-out-of-the-fridge lunch box.

"Is there anything you want to have in particular?" I asked. "You should've told me in advance—I could've been so much more prepared..."

"Hmm," said my mom. "How about...spaghetti with meat sauce!"

"Comin' right up!" I cheerfully shouted, then headed off to the kitchen to whip up my mom's order. *She wants meat sauce, huh? She also just got up, though, so I should try to make it as light as possible.*

"Sorry to make you go through the trouble," my mom called out.

"It's totally fine!" I replied. "You really love your meat sauce, though, don't you, mom?"

"It was the first thing you ever cooked for me, so of course I do!"

"I didn't even *make* the sauce the first time I cooked for you! I just boiled some pasta and slapped on some sauce from a packet!" I still remember my first time cooking for her quite well. I'd been in elementary school, and I was so little I had to stand on a stool to reach the stovetop. I knew that she always cooked for us despite being busy with work, though, and that made me so set on helping her that I'd insisted on cooking for the night.

"You were just the *cutest* little thing back then," said my mom. "You got scared by the fire when you lit the stove up, and then you got scared by the pot when the water started boiling!"

"C-Come on, don't remind me!" Those were probably cherished memories for her, but they were deeply embarrassing ones for me. All I'd *really* had to do was boil some pasta, and yet I still managed to add way too much salt to the water and overcook the noodles to boot. My mom and dad said it was tasty anyway, but I knew they were just being nice. The faces that Sakura and Aoi pulled as they ate made *that* pretty obvious. "Just for the record, I've grown up a lot

since then! I can make meat sauce from scratch these days, and I cook my pasta to a perfect al dente!” Of course, my special technique for cooking pasta was literally just setting a kitchen timer.

“Oh, right! I’ve been meaning to ask you something, Yotsuba,” said my mom.

“Yeah?”

“Did something happen between you and your sisters?”

“Pff?!” It was such an abrupt, swerving left turn to take the conversation in, I actually did a spit take.

“Sounds like a yes to me,” said my mom. “That’s pretty rare, isn’t it?”

“U-Umm, I mean, I can explain—”

“Oh, don’t worry. I know that having your parents butt in will probably just make things more complicated. I just thought it was strange for those two to take that kind of attitude with you, that’s all.”

“Strange? You think so?” I asked.

“Well, yeah! Those two usually stick to you like glue!” said my mom, making it sound like it was so obvious, she didn’t even know why I’d bothered asking.

“But, I mean—okay, setting Aoi aside, Sakura’s been really prickly with me for ages,” I protested.

“That’s only because she wants your attention,” said my mom. “She just can’t bring herself to ask for it in front of Aoi. I think her exams might be stressing her out a little too, but it’s not like she’s *really* been taking that stress out on you. That’s another little way she shows her affection indirectly, don’t you think?”

I fell silent, considering her words.

“Of course, Aoi is a little *too* upfront, if anything,” she continued, forcing a chuckle out of me. “But lately they haven’t been talking with you much at all, and I get the feeling that you’re all avoiding each other.”

“I’m not avoiding them, really,” I mumbled.

“Well, personally speaking, I’ll be happy if you manage to make up soon. It’d be such a shame for you kids to spend our whole hot springs trip fighting with

each other!” said my mom.

“Yeah, I know... I’m sor—wait, what hot springs trip?”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? I got a reservation at the hot springs inn this weekend, so we’ll be going on a family trip.”

“Nobody told me about—wait, maybe you did, actually?!” I *very* dimly remembered somebody mentioning something along those lines, now that my memory had been jogged. *That’s right—she brought it up right before summer vacation started, but I was so excited about only failing one subject I was barely even listening!*

“I hope you didn’t make plans?” my mom asked.

“N-No, I didn’t! But, umm,” I said, then hesitated. A family trip to a hot spring was far from a rare event in the Hazama household. All five of us loved hot springs, and we’d been going to the same inn for as long as I could remember. It had a really nice atmosphere, their food was delicious, and the view from the outdoor bath was really pretty. A trip there was good news for sure, but I was still a little preoccupied. “Hey, mom?” I said.

“Hm?”

“Can I ask for something sorta selfish?”

“Selfish? *You?*”

“Is that a no?”

“Not at all! It’s just so rare for you. Your father would probably be weeping with joy if he were here right now!”

“Okay, you’re definitely exaggerating,” I said, just as the timer I’d set went off. “Ah, sorry, mom—let me take care of this really quickly!” I put the conversation on hold for a moment to drain the pasta and mix it up with a little olive oil. Then I piled it onto a plate, poured the meat sauce I’d made while we were chatting on top, and breakfast was served! “Okay, order up!”

“Mmm, that smells *amazing*,” said my mom. “You really are a genius in the kitchen, Yotsuba!”

“I’m *average*,” I countered as I set a fork and spoon on a tray along with her

pasta, plus a container of Parmesan and a bottle of Tabasco, then carried it all out to the living room. “What do you want to drink? Is barley tea okay?”

“That’d be great, thanks!”

I poured a glass of tea for my mom and another for myself, then brought them both out to the table.

“Thanks again,” my mom said, then took a bite of the pasta. “Mmm, I knew it! It’s as delicious as ever—this gets a perfect score!”

“Hee hee... Thanks,” I said. Everyone in my family always made their appreciation for good food very apparent, which made cooking for them always feel worth the effort. It occurred to me in retrospect that I should’ve made a serving for myself—it was a little early for lunch, but I was starting to feel peckish watching her eat.

“So, what’s this about wanting something selfish, Yotsuba?” asked my mom.

“Oh, right! Well...it’s about the hot springs trip...”

My mom was a little surprised by my request, but she sent my dad a message right away and gave the inn a call to see if they could manage it. “All right! They said that’s fine,” she told me as she hung up.

“Thank you!” I replied. “Sorry for asking for this, mom.”

“Don’t be! You remember what I told you a moment ago, right? You could stand to be a little more selfish sometimes,” my mom said as she patted me on the head.

I felt a little guilty asking for something like this, considering I was going out of my way to hide my pair of girlfriends from her...but no, I couldn’t let myself get distracted. I had to focus on the immediate problem before anything else! A hot springs trip had sprung up out of nowhere (on account of my having forgotten about it), and that was a purely family event! The inn was far enough away that we had to drive, and that meant Sakura, Aoi, *and* I would all be trapped there, unable to escape each other! I had a plan—it was time for Operation Steamy Sisterly Spat-Soothing! Which was a little bit of a mouthful, I’ll admit, but whatever! *Heh heh heh... I’ll be putting this plan into action before I know it!!!*

“Yotsuba... You know you laugh like a weirdo, right?”

“Wow! Mean!”



The next few days passed in the blink of an eye, and before I knew it, the weekend arrived. I'd decided to hold off on going out with Yuna and Rinka until I settled things with my sisters, and lacking plans with them, plus the fact that my makeup lessons weren't scheduled till the second half of summer, meant that I didn't have many reasons to go out, so I wound up living the shut-in life for the rest of the week. I was so bored, I even started on my summer homework, if you can believe it! If this wasn't the most productive week of my life, I'll eat my—okay, no, I'm lying. I blocked out time to work on my homework, yes, but that doesn't mean I actually managed to make any progress on it.

I also bumped into Sakura and Aoi a few times over the course of that period, but unsurprisingly, they snubbed me each and every time. Honestly, the damage to my emotional state was reaching critical mass—but I was still okay! I'd laid my plans, and I knew I'd have the chance to really talk with them soon...or that's what I kept telling myself, anyway. In the end, I decided to avoid *them* as much as I could as well, in the hopes of both making things less painful on myself and ensuring I didn't give in to the stress, freak out, and self-destruct.

I was, however, running a little-sister energy deficit the likes of which I hadn't seen since before Sakura was born. I mean, even when I ended up away from home for long periods of time—like for a school trip—I'd always make sure to call them every single night! I wasn't at all used to this degree of noninteraction, and as a direct result, my mental stamina was in tatters before even a single day had passed.

It all came to a head when, even though I was inside my own home, I suddenly got the distinct and powerful sense that *someone* was watching me. As to how I sensed that—I dunno! Maybe as my little-sister energy reserves ran dry, my sixth sense grew sharper to compensate? I'd always been super creeped out by supernatural stuff like that, honestly...but still, I psyched myself up and spun around to confront my mysterious observer...

“What?”

“Yeah, *what?*”

...and they got me! Sakura and Aoi were standing there, right behind me—and this wasn’t even the only time it happened! Every time I’d spin about, they’d just *happen* to glance at me at that precise moment as well. Then they’d give me an irritated glare and stare right back at me. Basically, I was pretty sure I was accidentally giving them the mistaken impression that I spent all my time staring at them! *Ugggh... I’m not, though, I swear!*

I was half convinced that there was a meddling poltergeist in our house, doing its best to make me break my ascetic vow of sister nonobservance. Of course, if I actually tried using an excuse like that for real, they’d think I was a lunatic and look down on me even more than ever, so instead I’d just give them an awkward “O-Oh, nothing,” fake a smile, and look away before the urge to start sobbing overwhelmed me.

As I looked back over the past several days, I finished packing my bags just in time to set off on our family trip.

“Okay, everyone, climb in!” said my dad, who was the main driver in our family.

We all started piling into the car when I was suddenly struck with a realization. *Oh! Right! Wh-What should I do here...?* I wondered, paralyzed with indecision. You’d think I would’ve realized that this would be a huge problem before now, but somehow, the fact that our car was *not* big by any estimate had slipped my mind!

The Hazama household’s car was the sort of small, perfectly ordinary vehicle that was typical for families where we lived. It had a driver’s seat, a front passenger’s seat, and a back seat that could just barely fit three people if they were willing to get a little cozy with each other. That meant five seats total, and the front two, of course, would be occupied by our mom and dad, leaving me, Sakura, and Aoi to sit in the back together!

Now, normally, sitting together like that would be a *perk*, not a problem! Given the current circumstances, though, I had a feeling my sisters would be

less than pleased with the arrangement, and the idea of upsetting them like that was really upsetting for *me* in turn. Even worse, we usually sat with me in the middle and Sakura and Aoi on either side, sandwiching me between them like I was a customer at some sort of little-sister hostess bar. There was just *no way* the two of them would be up for—

“Hurry up and get in, Yotsuba.”

“Wha—Sakura?!” I yelped. “You actually *talked* to me!”

Sakura hesitated for a moment, then whispered quietly enough that our parents wouldn’t hear her. “Mom and dad went to the trouble of setting this whole trip up, so I’ll let it go for now for their sake.”

In other words, even though she couldn’t stand—no, I mean, even though she had certain opinions about how I’d been behaving recently, she was going out of her way to preserve our family unity! She was so nice, it was almost overwhelming!

“I feel the same way... We can act like we always do for now,” said Aoi, giving my arm a hug.

...Okay, not really, but she *did* grab onto my sleeve in a show of feigned friendliness. It was the barest hint of contact, but that was plenty to make me pleased as punch. I was actually *this* close to getting carried away and hugging her on the spot, but I had at least enough sense to realize that would be an awful idea. “O-Okay, thanks,” I said, leaning in close to whisper to them and controlling my urges with an iron fist.

The two of them flinched back, which was a pretty clear sign that not hugging them really was the right call.

“A-All right, you can sit in the middle,” said Sakura, pulling me by the wrist as Aoi pushed me from behind.

“S-Sure!” I agreed.

As the three of us climbed into the car, the thought struck me that if our mom had noticed how awkwardly we’d been acting with each other, it was totally possible our dad had as well. Neither of them said a word about it, though, instead just smiling as they watched us pile on in. I felt grateful for their

consideration and also more resolved than ever to do *something* to fix this, and soon. The future of the Hazama household was hanging upon my efforts!

Yes, okay, I *was* the one who'd caused all of this in the first place...but still!



The hot spring was about an hour and a half away from our house by car. We stopped at a couple rest spots along the way, but for the most part, that time was spent on the road, and it didn't take me long to realize that the back seat felt a lot less spacious than I remembered. It *had* been a pretty long while since we'd all driven somewhere together, but still, the contrast really struck me. Of course, that wasn't really a surprise at all. The three of us were all adolescents, after all, and Aoi and Sakura in particular were growing up at a steady pace.

Still, though, I had to wonder—were they *really* okay getting pressed arm-to-arm with me like this? Was it bothering them...? Sakura and Aoi, for their parts, both had their eyes clamped shut and were staying quiet. At a glance, they looked like they were focusing on something, but the truth of the matter was that all three of us shared a common weakness: we got carsick *really* easily. We'd all taken motion-sickness medicine before setting out, of course, and our dad was driving as smoothly as he could out of consideration for us, which would normally be enough to spare us any nausea. But all it took was the slightest attempt to read a book or glance at our phones to make us sick to our stomachs, and I didn't want to distract the two of them, so all I could really do was follow their example and clam up.

"Sakura, Aoi, are you okay back there?" our mom asked, glancing back at us. Our silence must have made her worried.

"Ah—I think they're a little carsick!" I replied in their place.

"Oh? I'll crack the windows, then," our mom said, then turned to our dad. "Could you pull over at the next rest stop?"

"Can do," said our dad. "Hang in there, you two!"

Now, I was fairly certain that their "carsickness" was really just them being upset about sitting so close to me. That being said, I couldn't stop myself from worrying a little that maybe they really *were* feeling ill. Normally this would be

the part where I'd rub their backs to make them feel better...but I knew they probably didn't want that, and in the worst case they might even throw up the second I touched them, at which point I'd have no choice but to hurl myself out the window. *Yeah, I should just leave them alone. I'm sure they'll be much happier that—*

"Ugh..."

"Huh?!"

The very instant I decided to leave them be, Aoi shuddered, then leaned right onto me! I just couldn't restrain myself any longer, and asked, "Are you okay, Aoi? Here, have some water," rubbing her back and offering her a bottle I had on hand. My determination hadn't even lasted a minute.

"Yotsuba," said Aoi, her eyes flickering open with shock. She hesitated for a moment, then accepted the bottle and took a drink.

"Well? Did that help a little?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah," said Aoi.

"Don't worry—we'll find a place to park before you know it," I reassured her.

"Yeah... Thanks, Yotsuba," Aoi replied.

"It's fine," I said. *What, why am I saying it's fine?! Aoi's the one who's sick!*
"How about you, Sakura? Are you okay? If there's anything I can do to help, just say the word!"

Sakura, who'd been staring fixedly at us throughout the whole exchange, grunted and awkwardly looked away again. She didn't *look* super sickly or anything...but I was still worried.

"Seriously, tell me if you feel bad, all right?" I said again.

"Not fair..." Sakura muttered.

"Huh?"

"Ah... Nothing! I'm fine," she insisted, then looked out the window with a huff. That meant I could see her expression reflected in the glass, and see that she looked like she was trying to bear an incredible discomfort.

Before I even knew what I was doing, I'd reached toward her back.

"Ah! Hey, what're you—"

"Sorry," I said, "but just let me rub your back for a minute...okay?"

"Mnh... Fine," Sakura begrudgingly muttered.

I knew that she was only letting me help because our parents were right in front of us, but still, getting to be of any use at all made me so happy I could almost cry. We were *finally* acting like siblings again, at least on a surface level. I knew that our mom and dad were glancing back at us in the rearview mirror every once in a while, which was a little embarrassing, for sure...but getting to feel my sisters' warmth for the first time in days made me more than giddy enough to make up for it.



It sort of felt like things between us had moved forward, but it sort of felt like they'd regressed at the same time. *Something* seemed to have changed a little, in any case, and while I pondered the matter, we drove along and eventually arrived at the hot spring hotel right on time. The hotel's name, by the way, was Banri Hot Springs Hotel, which I'd misread as "Bunny Hot Springs" when I was little and had taken a liking to it as a result. Well, really, I shouldn't say that I misread the sign—in truth, all three of us Hazama sisters made the exact same mistake.

Our parents went to the front desk to check in while I sat around in the lobby, drinking a cup of tea the staff had given me. I wasn't just sitting there mindlessly, though—I was running time after time through my plans for what was about to happen and listening to my heart pound away in my chest, doing my best to quell my nerves and stay calm. Sakura and Aoi were sitting nearby, by the way, but both of them had their eyes glued to their phones and weren't saying a word. I'd felt like I'd gotten a little closer to them—to Aoi in particular—back in the car, but it seemed it wouldn't be that easy to bridge the gap after all.

Hm...? Wait a minute—if they're focused on their phones, then doesn't that mean I can observe them all I want without getting caught?! I'm a genius! I pulled out my own phone, pretended to look down at it, then stealthily went

into sister-watching mode! *Gah?! They...they're so cute!!!*

My sisters were, as it happened, as adorable as ever. Sakura's outfit had a really chic, *clean* vibe to it, but she still had her hair tied up in her usual pigtails, which gave her a really youthful image. It all came together to make her look like an innocent, naive, and sheltered young lady! I wanted to give her head *such* a patting! *Especially* if it made her get all adorably grumpy! Aoi, meanwhile, was looking stylish as *heck*! She had one of those brightly colored shirts on that you can only get away with wearing if you're fashionable and you know it, and while her outfit *was* pretty casual, that aspect gave it a certain mature vibe, I guess...? She was exuding *such* a cheerful extrovert aura, I was practically suffocating in it!

Seriously, they're just so cute... I wanted to take a picture, but I knew they'd notice if I pointed my phone at them. It was still really tempting, though.

"Okay, thanks for waiting!" said our dad as he and our mom walked over from the front desk.

"Huh?" Sakura grunted with surprise as she looked over at him—specifically, at the keys in his hand. "You reserved *two* rooms?"

"Ah!" yelped Aoi as she noticed the extra key as well.

Whenever we came to Banri Hot Springs, we always reserved a single room for the five of us. It was cheaper that way, and we didn't really have a good reason to *want* more than one room—heck, I think we all preferred having the whole family together. Sakura's leap of logic had been right, though: tonight, we'd be sleeping in separate rooms.

"Wait," Aoi said. "If you and mom are taking one room, then that means the other will be me, Sakura...and Yotsuba?!"

"That's right," said our mom. "We'll be eating together, though—don't worry! Dinner will be served in the dining hall at, umm, seven, I think they said? I'll send you a text!"

"We may be in separate rooms, but they *are* right next to each other," added our dad. "We'll be right there if you need us for anything. I'll let you keep track of the key, Yotsuba."

“Sure,” I replied. “Thanks, dad.”

Sakura and Aoi just stood there, gaping at us, as he handed me the key to the room. I, of course, had known about this arrangement in advance. After all—I was the one who’d asked our mom to set it up this way!

“We’ll be staying...”

“...all alone with Yotsuba?”

And, yes, I did feel a *little* guilty about it when I saw how obviously shaken the two of them were—on top of the guilt I’d already been feeling for imposing my selfish request on my parents after they’d gone to the trouble of planning this trip for us—but this was an important part of my plan. I was going to make up for all the time we’d spent *not* interacting up until now by interacting with my sisters as much as humanly possible...and in doing so, establish the relationship we’d have with each other from now on. I was dedicated to ensuring our sisterly dynamic was as ideal as possible for Sakura and Aoi...and me, if I could possibly manage to squeeze my needs in there as well.



Sakura confronted me the moment we split up with our parents and stepped into our room to drop off our luggage. “You knew about this, didn’t you, Yotsuba?”

That wasn’t an issue, though! I’d seen this coming, and I was totally prepared to stand strong and—

“Y-Yeah... I’m sorry...”

Gah! Where did that come from?! It was like I lost control of my body for a second! But, like, come on—how was I supposed to resist?! Little-sister-type attacks are super effective against big-sister types! All the good feelings are multiplied a hundredfold, but the painful ones are too! Getting confronted by my sister *that* directly blew all the theories and logic I had prepared out of my mind, leaving me unable to do anything other than apologize profusely!

“Was this whole trip part of your plan? To get a chance to talk with us about...you know...the thing?” asked Sakura, losing steam at the very end. I guess she didn’t even want to say the words “two-timing.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “The trip was mom and dad’s idea. I just asked them to reserve a separate room for us because of all that stuff.” It’s possible that I could’ve pretended I’d been planning on coming clean here. I could’ve told them that I’d originally planned on confessing everything about my two-timing during this trip, and they might’ve believed me. Sakura’s question almost made it sound like she *wanted* me to make that sort of excuse...but I couldn’t lie to them. I didn’t *want* to lie to them.

“Oh,” Sakura said, then fell silent.

Aoi had been quiet throughout our whole exchange, just watching us tensely, and I felt a heavy, awkward pall begin to fall over the room.

I had to say *something*. I’d gone to the trouble of setting this stage for us, so I had to use it somehow... *Somehow*...

“Sakura...Yotsuba!”

“Ah!” gasped Sakura.

“A-Aoi?” I said, startled as well by Aoi abruptly breaking the silence.

“S-So, umm... Do you want to head over to the hot spring?” Aoi asked. “W-We came all the way here, after all. It’d be a waste not to take a bath, right?”

“Hey, Aoi!” Sakura snapped. She stormed over, grabbed Aoi by the arm, and pulled her into a corner of the room. “Aoi, you *wouldn’t*...”

“But... I can’t be the only one...”

“Well... But that’s not...”

“In that case...and then...”

“Wha—?! S-Seriously, Aoi?!”

I didn’t catch most of their exchange—they were whispering so quietly I only picked up bits and pieces—but I could tell that they were arguing about something. “H-Hey, what’s wrong, you two?” I asked.

Sakura glanced over at me in alarm, then back to Aoi. “*Fine*, then!” she whisper-shouted.

“U-Umm...?” I tentatively started.

“Come on, Yotsuba, get your bath stuff together! Unless you want to stay behind and watch over the room while we’re in the hot spring?” said Sakura.

“Ah, uhh... R-Right, I’ll come too!” I said, in spite of my many, many questions. *What the heck were those two talking about just now?* I wondered as I got my stuff together, Sakura hustling me along all the while.



We stepped from the changing room into the hot spring’s shower room to find the place completely abandoned. Not even our mom was in there—our dad was tired out from all that driving, and I assumed that she was keeping him company as he relaxed in their room. In short, it felt like we had the whole place reserved, just for us!

“Hey, hey, Yotsuba!” said Aoi.

“Yeah?” I replied.

“Want me to wash you?”

I blinked. “Huh?”

“Hey, Aoi!” Sakura snapped once more.

“You don’t have to worry about this, Sakura,” Aoi asked. “I just feel like it, that’s all!”

What kind of ridiculous turn of events is this...? And to think Aoi would be the one to initiate it! This wasn’t crazy out-of-character for her, to be clear—we’d used to bathe together pretty often at home, and every once in a while she’d offered to wash my back. In the current state of things, though, I never would’ve dreamed that she’d do something like that!

You’d think that, considering how cold and distant her attitude toward me had been up until just moments before and how suddenly she’d shifted to being *super* affectionate, the situation would’ve put me on guard. You’d really think that, wouldn’t you?

“O-Okay, then, sure?! I guess?!”

Unfortunately for me, I was a self-declared elite-tier sister obsessive! Maybe it was a trap, maybe it wasn’t—either way, I’d dive in headfirst without

hesitation!

“Great!” said Aoi. “Follow me, then!”

“Aoiiii,” Sakura groaned bitterly, but Aoi ignored her, pulled me over to the showers, and sat me down in front of one of the mirrors.

“Okay... Ahem!” said Aoi. “Thanks for coming to our salon today, ma’am! Just let me know if I’m tickling you or anything!”

“Huh?”

“All right, I’m turning the water on!” Aoi said, then took the shower head and started washing my hair.

“Uh, Aoi? You’re doing *all* the washing for me?! Not just my back?!”

“Yup! I never said I’d *just* wash your back, did I?”

“No, but, I mean, you don’t have to—”

“Whoops! Better keep your mouth closed—you wouldn’t want to get a mouthful of shampoo suds!”

“Ah, right...”

Aoi was acting just like she always did—I mean, just like she always had until recently. I was happy, to be sure, but beneath that happiness lay profound bewilderment. I mean, we hadn’t actually *talked* about anything yet! Nothing had been resolved!

This wasn’t an elaborate ploy to assault me with a shampoo bottle while my guard was down, though, or anything of the sort. Aoi really did just gently and carefully lather up my hair, then rinse it off again. “Okay, done! How’s that feel? Nice and clean?” asked Aoi.

“Y-Yeah. That was really nice,” I replied.

“Oh, good!” she said. “Next up, I’ll wash the rest of you!”

“Huh? No, wait—I can’t let you do *all* the work!” I protested. “You have to wash yourself too, don’t you?”

“Don’t worry—I’ve got it all under control! Besides...tee hee, I think washing you will get *me* nice and clean too,” said Aoi as she...lathered *herself* up with

soap?

What?! Don't tell me—is this that thing people supposedly do where they use their own bodies as a washcloth?! “A-Aoi?!” I yelped.

“Hee hee... This is a little embarrassing, huh...?” Aoi giggled.

Scratch all that stuff I thought before! Aoi is definitely not acting like she always does! Normally, Aoi would use an actual washcloth! Compared to how she usually acted, this new Aoi was just...coming on really strong, I guess? I suddenly wondered how Sakura was reacting to all of this and glanced around, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“Okay...here goes!”

“Hyeeek?!” I shrieked as I felt a soapy, slippery Aoi hug me from behind! “A-Aoi?!”

“You’re so nice and smooth, Yotsuba,” Aoi said as she rubbed up against me. She felt soft, and smooth, and warm...and really nice, honestly. “And pretty big up here too...”

“Eeeeeek?!” I shrieked even more emphatically as Aoi’s hands slid up to my chest—just poking and prodding a little at first, but escalating to full-on groping before I knew it! “A-Aoi, seriously...”

“Th-This isn’t weird or anything, okay?! I’m just washing you, that’s all!” Aoi insisted, but the way she was breathing in my ear seemed just a little too wild for me to take that totally at face value!

And I really could feel her breath that easily—she was pressed just that close to me, and even though she was my sister, I found myself sort of just...spacing out.



“Yotsuba... Yotsuba, Yotsuba,” Aoi muttered, as if she were savoring the sound of my name.

Okay. What should I do? And what the heck is she doing? I have no idea what’s going on right now...but! “A-Aoi!!!”

“Huh?!”

Gathering up the final ragged shreds of reason I had remaining, I somehow managed to slip free of her grasp and stand up! Aoi looked up at me, her eyes wide with shock...and I *did* feel a little guilty for what I was about to do, but not guilty enough to stop me.

“Thanks, Aoi! I sure am clean now!” I shouted, washing the soap suds off myself in the blink of an eye and fleeing the shower room as fast as my legs could carry me. I was running away from her, but I knew that I needed to take a minute and cool my head...and that Aoi definitely needed to do the same.

What on earth was that all about, Aoi...? I couldn’t quite explain it, but it had sort of felt like she was forcing herself out of her comfort zone. Compared to the way she’d acted up until today, she seemed way more assertive—pushy, even—but also incredibly nervous and stiff at the same time. And that wasn’t even starting on the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, she was still upset with me. Why would she have shifted so abruptly from being mad at me to, well...doing the sort of stuff to me that you’d normally do with your girlfriend?

“Yotsuba!”

“Ah, Sakura...”

An awkward pause ensued.

“Where’s Aoi?” Sakura eventually asked.

“Oh, she’s—” I began, then hesitated. “She’s, umm, still in the shower, I guess?”

“Okay,” said Sakura, sounding totally unconcerned as she leaned further back to bask in the hot water. She was the only one out of the three of us who kept her hair long, and she’d tied it up into a bun to keep it from dangling into the hot spring, which gave her a sort of mature, almost sultry image. “Aren’t you

getting in?” she asked.

“Ah, uhh... I, I guess?” I said. “You don’t mind if I do?”

“This isn’t *my* hot spring.”

“Y-Yeah, of course it isn’t! Ha ha ha,” I laughed, incredibly preoccupied by the possibility that whatever bizarre transformation Aoi had gone through could’ve afflicted Sakura as well. I was half anticipating it, half bracing myself for it, but in the end, her reaction to my entry onto the scene was exactly as cold and indifferent as ever.

Actually, wait—is this the same as ever? Or is she being even colder than usual? U-Ugggh... My mind’s a mess right now! I guess I’d better have a soak and try to calm down, before anything else.

But then, the moment I stepped into the bath, Sakura let out a little “hmph” and stood up!

“Wait, you’re getting out?!” I shouted.

“Yeah. So?” said Sakura.

Getting out of the bath because I’m getting into it is about as blatantly unfriendly as you can get! She really is acting super cold right now! She’s totally mad at me! This time, I found myself torn between despair and relief. It was a pretty complicated emotion, to say the least, and I ended up holding back tears once more.

Sakura, meanwhile, was giving me a very long and unusually serious look. “H-Hey, Yotsuba?” she said.

“Yeah...? What is it...?” I groaned.

“Do you wanna go outside?”

“Huh?”

“To the open-air bath. You know, the hot spring that’s outside?”

I know! That’s not the part I was questioning, actually!

“This bath is totally deserted, right? I was thinking the one outside will probably be too,” Sakura explained.

“Oh, right! Yeah, it probably is,” I agreed.

“Let’s go, then. It’s not every day we get a chance like this.”

“Er, I mean... H-Hey, Sakura,” I said, but Sakura was hearing none of my complaints as she took me by the hand and pulled me toward the outdoor bath.

She is trying to act cold toward me, right? Wasn’t she supposed to be super upset with me? But then why would she go out of her way to take me to the outdoor bath with her? You’d think that’d be the exact opposite of what she’d be doing here! What the heck is going on with her and Aoi today?! Something must’ve happened, right?!

Sakura drew in a sharp breath as she stepped outside. “I know it’s summer and all, but it feels pretty chilly out here, huh?” she commented.

“Y-Yeah,” I agreed. I *was* feeling a slight chill, when she put it that way. The fact that I was naked certainly played a part, of course, and as I settled into the hot water, I idly reflected that going to an outdoor bath was just about the only circumstance in which you’d ever end up outside in the nude. *Ahh, that’s nice... The weather’s great too, and the view of the mountains from this bath is so pretty. It’s like all my stress is melting away...*

“That face makes you look brain-dead, Yotsuba.”

“I-I’m not making a face!”

“You really are. I should’ve brought a camera,” said Sakura with an amused smile. A smile I got to see from right up close...which was kind of weird, actually, considering that the outdoor bath was *huge*! There she was, though, sitting so close to me that “shoulder to shoulder” would’ve felt like an understatement.

“Wh-What’s up, Sakura?” I asked.

“Nothing’s up,” Sakura replied.

“No, I mean, something’s definitely—”

“Is *not*!” Sakura snapped, then scooted even closer, hooking her elbow around mine in a defiant attempt to show that this was, somehow, normal.

“S-Sakura...?” I said.

“What’s the big deal...?” Sakura muttered. “We used to link arms all the time, right?”

“I guess, but, like,” I began, then trailed off. She wasn’t wrong, *per se*. If this were the old Sakura, from way back when she was a little kid, then this sort of affection would’ve been perfectly unsurprising. But I wasn’t dealing with tiny, friendly Sakura—I was talking to the teenage, hostile version! I could’ve *sworn* she was furious with me! All of this was making me as curious as I was bewildered, but more than anything, I was starting to feel just plain worried about her.

“Hey, Yotsuba...do you remember back when we were kids?”

“U-Uhh,” I grunted. “Maybe? What part?”

“The part where...you kissed me.”

“Pfffgwaugh!!!”

Her response was such a shocker, I actually choked on my own spit. Of all the old, dusty memories she could’ve dug up, she really had to go for *that* one?!

This was way back when both of us were little kids. I think I was probably somewhere in the first few years of grade school, and Sakura either had *just* started grade school or might’ve even still been in kindergarten.

It was late enough in the evening that our mom had just gone off to put Aoi to bed, in spite of her protests that she wanted to “play with Yotsuba more,” leaving me and Sakura to watch some drama on TV with our dad. I’d *really* loved TV dramas back then, which in retrospect might’ve been a little precocious of me, and Sakura had taken to watching them as well thanks to my influence. The programs we watched were definitely a little more adult-oriented in their subject matter than your typical kids programming, but we were nice and quiet while we watched them and tended to focus on them so hard that we’d exhaust ourselves and fall asleep right afterward, which I’m pretty sure is why our parents let us get away with it.

Anyway, it all started thanks to the climax of one drama series in particular—one that really went all in on the torrid romance, even by the standards of that

sort of show. The main couple had overcome all sorts of obstacles, finally finding true love with each other and exchanging a super dramatic kiss. It's kind of embarrassing to admit it, but back then, Sakura and I were completely mesmerized by the program.

Late that night, after we'd returned to the room the three of us shared back then and crawled into our respective futons, Sakura whispered to me, "Hey, Yotsuba," careful to stay quiet and not wake Aoi up.

"Yeah, Sakura?" I replied. Normally that would've been the start of a hushed conversation about the plot of the show we'd just watched, and that day was no different...except for the fact that one scene in particular had really caught her attention.

"The kiss was really amazing, right?" Sakura said. It seemed that the *act* had grabbed her more than the actual story itself. "Wasn't it all *moving* and stuff?"

"Yeah!" I agreed.

"I wonder if I'll kiss someone like that someday," Sakura mused.

"I'm sure you will, if you fall in love with someone!" I said, acting sort of like I was above all that. I *was* the older sister, after all. *I'd* never kissed anyone either, needless to say, but I always felt the need to make myself look impressive in front of Sakura and Aoi. It's an older-sister thing. If you know, you know.

"You kiss if you fall in love?" asked Sakura.

"Yeah," I said. "Umm... You're supposed to kiss people if you love them so much, you wanna marry them. The people in the show kissed because they both love each other, right?"

"Oooh... If you wanna *marry* them," Sakura repeated, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

It seemed she was really interested in marriage and all that jazz, in spite of how little she was. Not that I was any different—I'm sure that I still thought I'd meet someone wonderful and marry them back then...probably. I think. Pretty sure, anyway.

“Okay, so...Yotsuba?” said Sakura.

“Hmm?” I replied.

“Let’s kiss!”

“Huh?”

Sakura crawled over and wrapped her arms around me. “Yeah! ’Cause I love *you*! I wanna marry you!”

“S-Sakura, quiet!” I whispered frantically. “You’re gonna wake Aoi up!”

“Ah! Sorry,” said Sakura, lowering her voice as her shoulders slumped with embarrassment.

It was so cute, I couldn’t resist the urge to pat her on the head—a gesture that Sakura appreciated so much, she rubbed up against me like a happy little cat.

“Can we, Yotsuba...?” she asked.

“I dunno...” I replied. Don’t get me wrong—I absolutely loved Sakura too! But the thing is, I had it in my head that kissing and marriage were for people like our mom and dad—that is to say, boys and girls.

“Come on, Yotsuba! Let’s kiss!” Sakura begged.

I groaned as her pleading gradually wore away at my will to turn her down. I was stuck—at this point, if I *did* refuse, it would make her feel like I *didn’t* love her! Sakura would be super sad! She might even cry!

“You mean...no?” said Sakura, her disappointment plain to see.

“I-I didn’t say *no*, but...no, never mind. Okay,” I said, finally caving to the pressure. “But look, Sakura—this is practice, okay? We’re practicing for when you do it with someone you love even *more* than me...got it?”

“But there’s *nobody* I love more than you,” said Sakura, cocking her head.

“Hee hee! Thanks—but I mean someone you find in the future,” I said.

“I’m not *gonna* find someone like that in the future,” Sakura pouted, once again acting so cute that I just couldn’t help but be touched by her adorableness.

“So, umm...should we try it?” I prompted.

“Yeah!” said Sakura, hugging me tightly and pursing her lips in my direction.

Umm, okay... I guess I’m supposed to do it...? At a flustered loss, I slowly leaned in toward her.

Crack!

The two of us yelped with pain. I’d felt something soft on my lips for just the slightest of moments before a blunt impact sent my mouth into agony. As best as I could tell, we’d plowed our teeth right into each other’s!

“K-Kissing hurts,” Sakura whimpered, her hands pressed to her mouth.

“Th-That was ’cause we hit our teeth! I don’t think it’s supposed to be like that,” I countered, doing my best to keep my voice low. I’d called it practice, but if we didn’t do something to fix this, we’d come out of it with *less* of an idea of how this worked than we’d had when we started! “L-Let’s try again, okay?!”

“Ugh,” Sakura groaned as she fought back tears.

“Try staying still this time, okay? Just like that,” I said.

“O-Okay,” Sakura replied, then closed her eyes, leaving it all to me. I’d have to make this work myself this time, one way or another.

Don’t rush... Nice and slow, and watch her carefully, just like you saw on TV...

“Yotsuba...” said Sakura.

“Yeah? Are you scared?” I asked.

“No... No, I’m not.”

“Oh, okay. Good...”

Sakura smiled as I gently patted her on the head, then leaned in, pressing my lips to hers. It barely lasted a moment—just the tiniest of pecks. The sort of casual kiss that people in other countries would probably think was just a greeting. Still, though, there could be no question about it: our first kisses had unmistakably been with each other.

If I’m gonna be completely honest, I was sure Sakura had either forgotten all

about that, or if she *did* remember, she'd decided that she'd be better off pretending it had never happened at all. I'd been under that impression *before* my two-timing was exposed, even. Sakura had been gradually drifting away from me for long enough that the possibility of her dragging those memories back to the surface had never even crossed my mind.

"So you *do* remember," said Sakura. "That reaction says it all."

W-Well, I mean, yeah, of course I do! I remembered it well enough to flash back through the whole experience in vivid detail, anyway. Considering what sort of memory it was, though, I was really at a loss for what to say to her. I ended up just sitting there, fidgeting awkwardly, until Sakura spoke up once more, her voice wavering slightly.

"Hey, Yotsuba...is there anything you want me to do for you?" she asked, puppy-dog eyes turned up at me.

Well, that sure came out of left field!!! "Wh-What do you mean, 'do for me'?! " I practically shrieked, thoroughly shaken. *I-I mean, we were just talking about our first kisses! A question like this after a conversation like that carries some serious implications! I can't not make this weird!*

"You know I'd do anything for you, right?" said Sakura.

"A-Anything...?" I repeated.

"Ah—maybe not anything that hurts, though," Sakura added, paused, then shook her head. "No, never mind. If that's the sort of thing you want, I can push through it..."

S-Sakuraa?! What the heck is going on with you?! Why are you being this aggressive all of a sudden?! Her attitude had done such a dramatic one-eighty compared to this morning, it was enough to give me whiplash.

"Whatever you want from me, I'm ready for it. I could do anything for you," said Sakura. She was getting really carried away now, moving right in front of me and staring directly into my eyes.

It was clear that the beautiful scenery wasn't even registering for her—she only had eyes for me, and the gaze she gave me was one that I knew very well. There was a flame burning within her—one that I'd experienced myself plenty

of times—and hers was burning hot enough that even *I* could feel it.

“Yotsuba,” Sakura said, “I never changed. I’m the same as I was back then.”

“Sakura...”

“I’ve felt the same way as ever this whole time,” she said, wrapping her arms around me—and shuddering ever so slightly as she did so. “So...I want to do something for you. Anything you want. No, I don’t just *want* to—I *will*, I promise!”

“H-Hey, Sakura...? I th-think the heat’s going to your head a little, or something,” I stammered.

“Maybe. Maybe it is...” said Sakura, still not tearing her intense, single-minded gaze off me.

I was vaguely aware that the distance between us was shrinking, little by little. We’d been together ever since she was born—ever since I became an older sister—but now, she was making a face the likes of which I’d never seen on her before. I couldn’t help but be captivated.

“Yotsuba...”

“S-Sakura...”

She was so close, I could feel her breath. It was like everyone and everything had vanished away—like we’d been swept off into our own little world for just the two of us. Her taste spread through my mouth—a taste altogether unlike the strawberry-toothpaste flavor I remembered from way back when.

“I love you, Yotsuba.”

Instantly, without question, I knew that this “I love you” carried a completely different nuance than it did when *I* said it to Sakura and Aoi. No, she meant it in the way that I did when I said it to Yuna and Rinka.



There was nothing I could say in response to that. Taking into account who I was—Yotsuba Hazama, her sister—none of the answers that came to mind felt like they could be anything other than a terrible mistake in one way or another. I mean, I'd planned this whole trip around getting my sisters to forgive me! I'd thought they were both holding me in contempt, and by showing them how earnest I was about my relationships, I'd be able to get them to accept me! It seemed, however, that I hadn't understood Sakura at all. Everything I'd thought about her—that she was in a rebellious phase, that she was distancing herself from me, that she hated me—all of that had been nothing more than a superficial shadow of the truth.

"I know I'm just putting you on the spot by saying all this," said Sakura. "We're related, after all... You're my big sister."

"Ugh," I grunted.

"Even I think that telling you this is an awful idea, but...but seeing you with someone like *her*—with a girl who's so cute that even another girl like me has to admit she's adorable—I just couldn't stop myself from breaking down and crying like a big, stupid idiot," Sakura said with a tragic smile.

And yet, still, I couldn't say a word.

"And then I learned that you had *another* girlfriend, and I...I just didn't know *how* to take that...but I knew that I had to do *something* to stop you. I mean, you're *t-two-timing* them?! I *know* how irresponsible you can be sometimes, but dating two people at once is a step too far! It's just not okay!"

W-Whoa, okay, she feels pretty strongly about this one! And from a societal perspective, she was also absolutely right. I couldn't say a word in my defense.

"And that means...that means you might as well date *me* instead!"

"Ah. Er..." *But why, though?!* was the first phrase that sprang to mind, but of course I couldn't actually *say* that. She looked so *serious* about it—like she genuinely believed that it was the only solution to my little two-timing issue. *B-But, still...* "Sakura," I said, "you know we're—"

"Yotsuba? Sakura?"

Sakura and I gasped with alarm. While we'd been preoccupied, Aoi had apparently stepped outside.

"A-Aoi," said Sakura. "You took your time."

"I was in the indoor bath," Aoi said. "I thought I should take a moment to reflect on stuff. Plus, you gave me time, so I thought I should give you time too."

"Reflect on stuff"...? Does she mean what she did a minute ago?

"Is it just me, or are things kind of heavy out here?" Aoi asked. "Wait... Sakura, did you tell her?"

"Ugh!" Sakura grunted.

Aoi sighed and gave Sakura an exasperated glare. *"Really...?"*

"I-I couldn't help it!" protested Sakura, who looked like a little kid getting scolded for some prank.

Is it just me, or has the power balance between those two totally flip-flopped? And wait, tell me what? She couldn't mean—

"Hey, Yotsuba," said Aoi, "the indoor bath is starting to get crowded, so why don't we go back before they start coming out here? I think Sakura's been in there a little too long for her own good, anyway."

"N-No, I haven't!" said Sakura.

"Of *course* you haven't," sighed Aoi. "That's exactly what someone who's just about to overheat would say. Come on, Yotsuba—help me haul her out of the bath."

"I-I'm *fine*, seriously! I can walk on my own!" Sakura shouted, jumping to her feet and storming out of the outdoor bath...er, I mean, into the indoor bath? The important thing is that it felt like she was making a scene to try and distract from all the other stuff that had just happened.

"Come on, let's go!" said Aoi.

"Ah, r-right," I said. "Umm... You didn't want to soak outside for a little, Aoi?"

"Hmm... I'll do that later, I think. I'm okay for now!" chirped Aoi with a smile

just as bright and cheerful as ever...but I just couldn't take it at face value.

"Did you tell her?" she'd asked. I couldn't think of any way to interpret that other than "Did you tell her that you love her?" *That would mean that Aoi knew how Sakura felt about me, wouldn't it? Or maybe...*

"What's wrong, Yotsuba?" Aoi asked.

"Ah, um," I barked.

"Oh, right!" Aoi continued, then trotted up to me and leaned right up next to my ear. "I love you too!" she whispered, then planted a kiss on my cheek.

"Uh...uhh?!"

"Tee hee!" Aoi giggled as a blush spread across her face. There was no doubt about it: she was using "love" in the same sort of way that Sakura had.

And that's how both of my *actual* little sisters *actually* came onto me on the same night!!!

Interlude: Sakura and Aoi's [Redacted] Stratagem

A few days earlier, shortly after Yotsuba's two-timing was exposed...

"What should we *do*, Aoi?!"

"What *should* we do, Sakura?!"

...Sakura and Aoi, having returned to their room, were engaged in a mutual fit of blind panic.

"I-I can't *believe* she's t-two, *two-timing* them!"

"C-C-Calm down, Sakura!!!"

"How am I supposed to calm down after *that*?! And besides, *you're* freaking out too, Aoi!"

"I-I'm the youngest child! I'm allowed to freak out!!!"

Productive discussion had very quickly taken a back seat to pointless, frantic bickering. The two of them took after Yotsuba very distinctly at times like these: they were both prone to succumbing to stress and nervousness at the drop of a hat. In this case, though, the root cause behind their total panic ran a little deeper than that. Putting it bluntly: both of them were driven by the unstoppable force of their all-consuming love for Yotsuba.

They were, of course, her actual, blood-related sisters. Between the familial relationship and the fact that they were girls, marriage was completely out of the question on multiple legal fronts, and the "being her family" part in particular meant that even just having their feelings exposed would spell complete and utter disaster for them. They were both perfectly aware of all that, and the only people who Sakura and Aoi had ever opened up to about their feelings were each other.

When Yotsuba got into high school, the Hazama household had gone through a major restructuring in terms of room assignments. While previously the three sisters had shared a single room, now Yotsuba had one to herself while Sakura

and Aoi were left together. Needless to say, being torn from their beloved sister instantly afflicted both of them with a case of acute Yotsuba deficiency (a term that they themselves coined). Finding themselves unable to sleep without her around, Sakura and Aoi both decided to take the less than well-advised step of creeping—or rather, *sneaking*—into Yotsuba’s new room to sleep there instead. They also decided to set out at almost the exact same moment and, inevitably, were shocked to find themselves just about tripping over each other. Nearly an hour later, spent glaring at each other and disregarding the fact that they really *should’ve* been sleeping, the two of them gave in and revealed their feelings for their sister to each other.

Ever since then, Sakura and Aoi had been co-conspirators, united by the need to keep their mutual secret buried. They were bound together as both rivals and comrades in love—a bond that deepened as time passed by, and that ended up making Yotsuba mildly jealous over how close the two of them seemed to have become the moment she was out of the picture. The two of them, of course, never came even close to catching on to that fact.

Sakura and Aoi were shameless sister’s girls like none other. As such, when they learned that Yotsuba was dating *two* incredibly beautiful girls, the two of them suffered without exaggeration the greatest psychological blow either of them had ever received.

“And I was trying *so hard* to accept the fact that she was dating a girl!” Sakura moaned.

The past few days had been absolutely and unequivocally miserable for her. To Sakura, the entrance exams for Eichou High represented a barrier that she’d have to overcome, no matter what it took, to secure a brief but blissful year in the same high school as her older sister. She hadn’t let a single day pass by without working toward that objective, and hadn’t let a single mock exam slip past untaken.

The pressure Sakura had been putting on herself was almost too much to bear, and two days before Yotsuba’s secret was exposed, an upcoming practice test had rendered Sakura so nervous that she’d gone reference-book shopping in an effort to take her mind off it. That was when—horror of horrors—she’d

happened to visit the same station-side bookstore that Yotsuba and Yuna Momose had made their way to, and witnessed the two of them mid-date!

Wh-Wh-Wh-What is she doing?! Why is Yotsuba being that stomach-churningly lovey-dovey with some girl?! Blindsided by the undeniable reality before her, Sakura had run home in tears without even buying the book she'd gone out for in the first place. Aoi quickly realized that something was wrong and tried to talk with her, but in the end, Sakura stayed bundled up in her bedsheets without saying so much as a word until dinnertime.

She had to come face to face with Yotsuba eventually, of course, but she did her absolute best to force herself to forget what she'd seen—or to accept it, if forgetting failed. In fact, she was so preoccupied with the effort that when her mock exam finally arrived, she found herself totally unable to concentrate, and had to resign herself to trying not to care about her scores for the moment as well.

"Me too... *Me too...*!" Aoi moaned.

Although Aoi had never realized it, she'd been living what Yotsuba would've described as the perfect life. Her grades weren't anything special, but she was charming and cheerful, had a ton of friends, and stood at the center of her class's social circle. Being three years younger than Yotsuba meant that she'd never have the chance to go to middle *or* high school with her, but whenever Aoi told Yotsuba stories about her friends and her school life, Yotsuba's gaze sparkled with joy and she praised Aoi to high heaven. Aoi was a naturally happy-go-lucky person and had far and away the most well-developed social skills of the three of them to begin with, but knowing that her sister liked it when she was sociable led her to make an active effort to improve those abilities even further.

On that fateful day—the day before Yotsuba's two-timing was exposed—Aoi had gone out into town with a group of friends from her class. She was fond of those excursions, though the stares of the boys in her friend group had been making her more and more uncomfortable lately—presumably, the ever-escalating impact of puberty was having an effect on their behavior. On that particular day, they'd all decided to hang out at a cheap chain restaurant and

chat—a pretty typical plan for kids their age—and Aoi had been perfectly satisfied with how the outing was shaping up until she glanced out the window and had her mind blown.

Y-Yotsuba's flirting with some girl in broad daylight?!

By pure happenstance, she'd turned around just in time to see Yotsuba walk past, hand in hand with Rinka Aiba! Just like that, Aoi's day was turned on its head. Before she knew it, she was pressed up against the window, bloodshot eyes fixed unblinkingly on the happy couple and momentarily oblivious to her worried friends as they called her name and asked her what was wrong. She corrected course and told them everything was fine a moment later, but the rest of the conversation that day went in one ear and out the other for her.

But what if we weren't sisters?

The thought had passed through Sakura's and Aoi's minds more times than they could count. They took pride in the fact that they knew Yotsuba better than anyone else—both her positive qualities and her flaws. She'd always been there to cheer them up when they were sad, and she'd always been there to celebrate with them when they were happy. They'd done the same for her as well, of course, and by the time they were old enough to grasp the concept of love, Yotsuba had already monopolized that corner of their minds. They knew that their feelings for her were abnormal, and they knew that they'd never possibly be fulfilled, but they still couldn't manage to get rid of them.

Sakura, for her part, made an effort to take a standoffish attitude with Yotsuba and force a sense of distance between them. The thought of souring her sister's opinion of her in the process was excruciating, but Sakura told herself over and over that this would be for her own good. The plan, however, backfired. For some incomprehensible reason, the more standoffish she acted with Yotsuba, the more aggressively Yotsuba piled on the affection—and in the face of that treatment, Sakura couldn't stop herself from giving in to temptation and letting herself be doted upon. What started as an effort to shove Yotsuba away had evolved into a weirdly backward attention-seeking scheme in its own right.

Aoi, meanwhile, had several times considered dealing with the problem by finding someone who could exceed Yotsuba in her eyes—in other words, by finding someone to date. She had plenty of friends, and plenty of those friends had asked her out over the course of time. Whenever a prospective relationship loomed, though, she'd immediately find herself concluding that it was out of the question and turning the invitation down. Yotsuba's presence in her mind was simply too great and her compulsion to let her sister spoil her too overpowering, even when people pointed out that it wasn't really behavior befitting a girl her age.

But then Yotsuba had gone and gotten herself a girlfriend, leaving the two of them behind with all those feelings weighing them down like so much baggage. The fact that she was dating a *girl* helped soften the blow a little, at least, but it was still quite the shock to their systems. A shock, yes...but one they knew they couldn't do anything about. No matter what they said or did, they would still be her little sisters. The reality of that fact was inescapable and immutable, and they understood it better than anyone.

And so, they decided to accept things as they were. They decided to accept that their sister had a girlfriend. They'd poke fun at her and vent their frustration on her a little, of course, knowing perfectly well it wasn't particularly reasonable of them—but in the end, they'd give her their blessing and congratulate her. That was all they could do as her sisters...or at least, that's what they thought at first.

"But *two-timing*, though?! How the *hell* were we supposed to see that coming?!" wailed Sakura.

"I guess we *didn't* ever talk with each other about what sort of person she was with, did we?!" Aoi moaned.

Suddenly, their resolve to congratulate Yotsuba had been blown far into the horizon. Once again they'd been confronted with a reality far, *far* beyond their wildest imaginings, and this time it had left them confused, dismayed, and totally discombobulated.

"It *is* true, right...?" said Sakura. "I mean, she admitted it herself!"

"Okay, but this is *Yotsuba*!" said Aoi. "There's no *way* she could ever manage

to two-time *anyone*! She'd get caught in a second!"

The fact that there was yet another reality they still had left to confront—that their sister was two-timing with the knowledge and permission of her girlfriends—was something that Sakura and Aoi had absolutely no hope of realizing themselves. Instead, they leapt to a very different and remarkably Yotsuba-like conclusion.

"Do you think, just maybe...she's getting swindled?" suggested Sakura.

"Wha?!" Aoi gasped. Sakura had a point—it was much, *much* easier to imagine their sister getting tricked by a pair of beauties than it was to imagine her *tricking* said pair. "I could see that... Actually, I can't see it being anything *but* that! She *is* kinda stupid, after all!"

"Right?" said Sakura with a grave nod of her head. "It's so believable, it's actually kind of sad."

"All they'd have to do is whisper a few sweet nothings in her ear, and she'd be dancing in the palms of their hands!"

For what it's worth, neither of them *intended* to slander their sister. When they called her an idiot, they didn't mean it as an insult—they meant it as an objective statement of fact.

"The girl I saw her with didn't *look* like a bad person, but I dunno," said Sakura. "She looked sort of sophisticated, I guess...? I mean, like, she didn't seem like someone who *Yotsuba* could manage to trick."

"I thought the same thing," said Aoi. "It looked like the girl I saw her with was leading *her* around by the nose..."

While on the subject of objective truths, the objective disparity between Yotsuba's specs and those of the Sacrosanct was huge enough that it made Sakura and Aoi's theory seem all the more plausible.

"That's gotta be it, right?" said Sakura.

"Yeah, no doubt about it!" agreed Aoi. "There's no way she could *ever* manage to two-time anyone!"

"But why would they trick her into two-timing them, though?" asked Sakura.

“I’m not sure...” said Aoi, sinking into thought. “Ah! What if they’re planning on letting her date them for a while, then accuse her of cheating on them and sue her?!”

“Sue her?!”

“I’m not really sure what law she’s breaking, but, I mean, cheating’s really bad, right...?”

“But—but that would *destroy* Yotsuba!” Sakura gasped. “She might *never* recover from something like that!”

Images flashed through their minds of Yotsuba losing all hope in humanity, dropping out of school, and barricading herself in her room for years on end. They visualized their sister’s dead-eyed, bloodshot stare, her messed-up hair, her poorly fitting sweats...and yes, they might’ve thought she’d look a *little* cute that way, but that wasn’t their highest priority at the moment.

“We can’t let that happen,” growled Sakura. “She’s *finally* started enjoying her school life these past few years—we can’t let them take it away from her!”

“Sakura...” said Aoi.

“So you know what we’re gonna do? We’re gonna save her!” Sakura declared, her eyes burning with steadfast determination.

“B-But what can we *do*?” asked Aoi. “Do we somehow get even with the girls she’s dating?”

“No,” said Sakura with a shake of her head. “If we went after them, Yotsuba would probably blame everything on us. As far as she’s concerned, they’re her girlfriends.”

“Right... They are, aren’t they?”

“Yeah...”

It was easy enough for Sakura to *say* they’d save Yotsuba, but that didn’t mean she’d be able to come up with a perfect strategy just like that. All that the two of them could do was let their desire to help their sister drive them onward as they focused all their hearts and souls into thinking something up...and in the end, all they managed to accomplish was wasting a ton of time without ever

actually arriving at a solution.



For lack of a better plan, Sakura and Aoi resolved to feign an indifferent distance toward their sister for the time being. The resulting case of acute Yotsuba deficiency was harsh, but the two of them remained resolved, knowing perfectly well that if they didn't make a concentrated effort to keep their disapproval of her two-timing *extremely* clear and consistent, they would end up giving in and going easy on her before they knew it.

The two of them were very aware of how fond of them Yotsuba was. They knew that acting coldly toward her would make her as depressed as it made them, and they hoped that would help her realize that what she was doing was a horrible idea and give it up on her own initiative. That, in their minds, would be an unambiguously happy ending. They could mend their relationship with her and go back to the peace and normality they'd enjoyed up till recently.

Things did not, however, go as Sakura and Aoi had anticipated. For some incomprehensible reason, when they started distancing themselves from Yotsuba, *she* returned the favor! The idea, it seemed, was that if they didn't want to be around her, her only choice was to respect their wishes and keep away from them—a reaction that caught them *completely* unprepared.

“Wh-What should we *do*, Sakura?! M-Maybe we can apologize to her...?”

“Ugh... N-No way! That'd make it seem like we're admitting we were wrong, and *that* would make it seem like we're okay with her two-timing!”

“But at this rate, we'll just drift further and further away from her!”

“Agggh,” Sakura groaned, clutching at her head in a desperation very similar to that which Yotsuba was currently going through—though Sakura, of course, was completely unaware of that fact. The temptation to let all of this be water under the bridge and go back to their former happy, friendly, sisterly relationship was real, and she *knew* it would probably be possible. The problem, however, was that then she and Aoi wouldn't be able to protect Yotsuba from the threats they perceived as looming over her. “Our trip's coming up soon too,” Sakura muttered. “At this rate, we're gonna make our parents worry about us...”

“The trip... Ah! That’s it!”

“What’s it, Aoi?! Did you have an idea?!”

“Yeah!” said Aoi, nodding vigorously. She looked a lot more optimistic than she’d seemed a moment earlier as she paused to think over her plan, then started to explain. “This is a family trip, and that means *just* family, right? She’s definitely not gonna bring her girlfriends along, right?”

“Right,” agreed Sakura.

“So in that case...we just have to use this trip to seduce her!”

“S-Seducer her?!”

“I’m sure she only started two-timing in the first place because she was lonely! You know how that goes, right? Like, she needed a boost to her self-esteem, or something? That means if we can give her that some *other* way, she won’t have to bother with the two-timing anymore, right?”

“I...guess that makes sense...”

“Maybe she doesn’t need a *girlfriend* to satisfy her needs—maybe we can do it for her instead! Then *everyone*’s happy! It’s a win-win!”

“Wait—if we’re satisfying her needs...wouldn’t that make *us* her girlfriends?!” shouted Sakura, who’d broken out into a vivid blush the moment she’d understood what Aoi’s plan would actually entail.

“But we’re her sisters!” countered Aoi. “Loving both of your younger sisters doesn’t count as two-timing, does it? It’s different!”

“Th-That’s true!” gasped Sakura. “But would Yotsuba actually, you know, *want* that sort of stuff from her sisters?”

“I’m not sure...but she’s already two-timing, so her moral compass must already be glitching out, right? I have a feeling she *might* actually be able to fall for us!”

“Harsh, but believable!” said Sakura. The idea that there was a chance they could have that sort of special relationship with Yotsuba had both of them in a mindset several times more positive than usual. “I guess we should probably try to keep up the distant act until right before we go for it, then?”

“Yeah,” said Aoi with a nod. “If we go from being super cold with her to super affectionate all at once, the contrast will be so crazy, she’ll be head over heels for us in no time!”

“Yotsuba, head over heels for us?!” Sakura gasped. “Heh... Heh heh heh...”

“You’re smiling like a creeper, Sakura.”

“Hey, *you’re* smirking too, Aoi!”

“Whaaat? Am I?”

“You sure are! Hee hee hee!”

Thinking about a blissful future that neither of them had so much as dreamed could ever come to pass had the both of them grinning and giggling with glee.

“We’ll have to keep a close eye on her when we get to the hot springs and wait for the perfect moment to spring the trap,” said Sakura.

“Sounds good,” agreed Aoi. “Mom and dad are gonna be there too, after all. We’ll have to figure out some way to get the three of us alone together...”

The possibility that Yotsuba had already made arrangements to have the three of them share a room was, of course, something that hadn’t so much as crossed Sakura’s and Aoi’s minds. As a result, they set about plotting and scheming, refining their plan as much as they could possibly manage.

“Every good plan needs a name...and I’m calling this one the Yotsuba NTR Stratagem! Let’s *do* this! Woo!” declared Aoi.

“W-Woo,” echoed Sakura, who didn’t actually know what “NTR” meant but decided to roll with it anyway.

And so the Yotsuba NTR Stratagem began under a veil of secrecy. Its eventual conclusion, however, was something that nobody—not Sakura, not Aoi, and definitely not Yotsuba—could have ever possibly anticipated.

Chapter 6: Sisters

“Hee hee hee! Yotsuba!”

“Hey, Aoi! Give her some personal space!”

“Oh, like you’re not doing it too, Sakura!”

The three of us had climbed out of the hot spring, dried off, gotten dressed, and returned to our room. I was barely paying attention throughout that whole process, though, to the extent that I even managed to forget my post—hot springs ritual of drinking a bottle of milk. The source of my distraction: the fact that each of my sisters was clinging to one of my arms, smiling so readily you’d think they were letting loose a wellspring of joy they’d been holding back for ages.

“U-Umm... Hey, Sakura, Aoi?” I said. “It’s pretty hot, isn’t it? Isn’t clinging to me like that gonna make you sweaty?”

“Hee hee!” giggled Aoi. “Yeah, it might!”

“B-But we just took a bath and everything,” I protested.

“We can always take another, right?” commented Sakura.

The two of them were completely immovable, and neither of them showed any sign of letting me go! *Wh-What should I do?* I wondered. My feelings on the current state of affairs were really, *really* complicated, to say the least! I mean, come on—my *sisters* had told me they love-loved me! Sakura had *kissed* me, for crying out loud! We had very definitely crossed a line that you weren’t supposed to get anywhere even *close* to with a family member...and yet I still couldn’t bring myself to feel *that* bad about it. *I mean, if they feel that way about me...that means they don’t hate me after all, doesn’t it?*

“S-So, umm...guys?” I said.

“Yeah?” said Sakura.

“Aren’t you, umm...mad at me, or something?” I asked.

“Mad at you...? You mean about the two-timing thing?” Sakura asked, her voice distinctly pointed in a way that made me flinch.

“Y-Yeah, that,” I said.

Sakura sank into thought, still clinging to my arm all the while.

Aoi, however, swept in to speak before Sakura could come up with a response. “Hey, Yotsuba—why *are* you two-timing them in the first place?” she asked.

“*Why?* Well, I mean...umm...because I love both of them, I guess,” I said, my voice gradually trailing off until I was practically whispering in the end. I’d realized halfway through that saying I was in love with two girls in front of two *other* girls who loved *me* was kind of an incredibly crappy thing to do.

“Hmm...” grunted Sakura.

“Oh, do you?” said Aoi.

Both of their reactions struck me as a little less than pleased, unsurprisingly. Unfortunately, there just wasn’t any other way for me to put it.

“Who asked who out?” asked Sakura.

“Was it you?” added Aoi.

“Uh... N-No, they asked me,” I answered.

“Hmmm...” grunted Sakura.

“Oh, *did* they?” said Aoi.

This time they seemed almost pleased somehow. I’d used to think that I knew everything there was to know about the two of them, but now, I was under no such illusions. I was perfectly aware that I had *no* clue what they were thinking, and all I could do was let them keep questioning me.

“In other words, that means it’s not like *you* told *them* you loved them before you started going out,” said Sakura.

“R-Right,” I replied.

“What about before then?” asked Aoi. “You were friends, right?”

“We, uh, were, yeah. They were really good friends of mine—way better than I deserved, really,” I said, then began telling my sisters about Yuna and Rinka. I was so nervous that part of me wanted to come up with some way to distract them and change the topic, but when it came down to it, my whole goal for today had been to tell my sisters about my girlfriends in the first place. I’d planned that speech out pretty well in advance, and I think I managed to spit it all out pretty eloquently—at least, judging by my standards, anyway.

“And, well, that’s about the size of it,” I said as I wrapped up my explanation. “Ah,” I added when I finally looked over and found the two of them sitting there, staring at me, perfectly silent and blank-faced. Like, seriously, they looked like all traces of human emotion had been drained away from them! There was just *nothing* there!

“Oh, I think we understand *very* well now,” said Sakura.

“O-Oh, you do? That’s grea—”

“Yup! You *really* love those two—we sure get that now,” said Aoi.

Both of their tones matched their expressions: stunningly flat and entirely unreadable. It was actually kinda scary, though I *could* tell that they were probably less than happy about all this. They were both squeezing my arms, as if doing that was helping them bear with something.

“I wonder about *them*, though?” said Sakura.

“Huh?”

“They’re really amazing people, right? The whole school’s obsessed with them, and calls them the, uhh...Sacrosanct, I think? They even have a fan club, right?”

“Y-Yeah,” I confirmed.

“Well, why would people like that fall for *you*?” asked Aoi.

Wham! I felt like I’d just been full-on punched in the face. It wasn’t exactly a difficult nit to pick in my story, but having one of my sisters question it still proved unimaginably destructive on a psychological level.

“Ah, wait—no, not like that!” said Sakura as I reeled. “We think you’re the

most amazing person in the whole world!”

“It’s just, well, that’s *us*,” said Aoi. “Looking at it by society’s standards, though, it’s, well...maybe a little different, I guess?”

“Y-Yeah, true enough,” I groaned. I was *really* starting to understand what it meant to be backed into a corner! Before today, I would’ve been over the moon to hear them call me the most amazing person in the world, but now that I knew how they really felt about me, I wasn’t even sure if it would be okay for me to accept a compliment like that without question.

“I don’t want to think that someone who’d fall for you could be a bad person, but, well...” said Aoi.

“It’s hard *not* to think they might just be using you,” Sakura concluded for her.

“U-Using me?!” I exclaimed. No *way* was that true! It was such an awful way of putting it that under normal circumstances, even *I* might’ve gotten mad at them for it. That said, it didn’t sound like they were saying it just because they were jealous. It also sounded like they were worried about me...actually, it *mostly* sounded like that. I couldn’t really let myself get mad, considering.

But anyway...I think I get it now. I’d assumed that the fact that *I* was the one doing the two-timing meant I would always be viewed as being in the wrong, while Yuna and Rinka would be viewed as being the victims of my actions. I certainly *hadn’t* anticipated the possibility that it could go the other way around and someone could assume that *they* were deceiving *me* somehow.

“I don’t want to see you get hurt, Yotsuba. I like you when you’re always smiling, always caring, and always thinking about us before anyone else... I want you to be *happy*!”

“Sakura...”

“It’s the same for me! If you need so much love that one person’s worth isn’t enough for you...then Sakura and I can give it to you! We’ll give you so much love, you won’t even be able to handle it! We’ll love you so much you won’t even be able to *think* about being lonely or sad anymore!”

“A-Aoi...”

Their words hit me hard, right in the emotions. I could tell that both of them *really* cared about me...but I still didn't know how I could possibly express what I was feeling. I was happy to hear that they cared about me so directly, of course—as their sister, there's no way that *wouldn't* make me happy! And yet, in spite of that, I couldn't *return* their feelings. I was, after all, their sister. We were honest-to-goodness blood-related family. We could never be anything *other* than that.

“I'm really happy you two care about me that much, but...” I began, then trailed off.

“‘But’ nothing!” Aoi pouted. “It's okay, Yotsuba—you can just go with it and not think too hard about it! We can be something *more* than sisters! Then we can spend every day together, and take baths together, and go to bed together, and everything... Or does that sound bad to you?”

“I-It doesn't sound *bad*... But, I mean...”

I couldn't deny that all of those things sounded great, and would certainly make me happy—but it wouldn't make me happy for the same reason it would them. The way we felt about each other was different, and I knew that difference could prove fatal for our happiness in the long term. If I turned a blind eye to it now, it would surely come back around to hurt the two of them someday.

“But there's always the chance I'll start feeling the same way they do after we're together, isn't there?”

A less than savory impulse flashed through my mind.

“Maybe Sakura and Aoi don't like being my sisters. Maybe I'm the only one who's overthinking this. Maybe I'm in the wrong here...”

I dunno... I guess...? It would be a relationship I could never tell anyone about, certainly, but then again, the same was true of my current two-timing. I was *already* breaking one of society's rules, so would breaking another while I was at it really make that much of a difference? In that sense, maybe I really *was* the one acting weird about all this.

I looked over at Sakura and Aoi, and the two of them returned my gaze. They

looked so *pure*, their expressions a portrait of innocence and harmlessness.

"I could just throw my arms around them and make them mine! What's there to stop me...?"

I guess I could, couldn't I? That's all it would take, and then I'd have my sisters' affection all to myself for all—

"No, Yotsuba! You can't!"

Wha—my inner angel?!

"And you—get out here, you sneaky little temptress of a devil!"

My inner devil too?!

"Peh! Just when I thought I'd get away with it..."

So, wait...all those impulses were the work of my inner devil? Now that I think about it, it did seem strange—my thoughts never have quotation marks around them!

"Listen up, Yotsuba. You can't just listen to anyone and everyone who whispers foul temptations in your ear!"

"Oh, like you're one to talk."

"Angels don't whisper! We stand tall and advocate for truth and justice, come what may!"

O-Oh, wow...

"Hot damn..."

Whoa—my inner devil was actually overwhelmed! That never happens!

"Meh. Say what you will, but the fact that we're here in the first place means that Yotsuba's already tempted."

"I won't deny that. You can rest easy, though, Yotsuba—I swear to you that I'll lead you down the right path!"

"By the way, me and the angel are both just part of Yotsuba's thought processes! None of this is literal—it's just a weird little comedy sketch."

"Oh, and while we're at it, let the record show that this is all playing out at

super speed over the course of less than a single second. No need to worry about any awkward pauses!”

And now they’re getting super meta with their exposition!!!!!!!!!!

“But seriously, though, you know I’ve got this one in the bag. Remember how I kicked your ass back with Yuna and Rinka?”

“Ugh... I’ll admit that I’ve been on something of a losing streak, yes... But even if I don’t have much of a chance, I can’t turn my back on her!”

I know that quote!!! That was straight out of that one manga I read the other day!

“Ahem... The point, Yotsuba, is that, speaking as an angel, I have no choice but to tell you that you must reject your sisters’ advances.”

Yeah, I had a feeling my inner angel would say something like that...

“Well, of course I would! After all, society at large would never accept a girl falling for her little sisters.”

“Oh, here we go, talking about society again!”

“Yes, we are, because it’s important and you know it! I’m not just saying this for Yotsuba’s sake either—I’m saying it for Sakura and Aoi’s as well.”

Yeah... Yeah, that’s right.

“If you were to start a romantic relationship with them, do you believe you would be able to make them happy? Nobody would ever accept or celebrate a relationship of that nature, no matter what. Not even Yuna and Rinka would be on your side, in all likelihood. Would you really force your sisters into that sort of situation, knowing full well how much misfortune it would bring them in the long run?”

“Hey, she’s not forcing jack on them! They want her!”

“You believe that granting them anything and everything they ask of you would be a kindness? Well, it isn’t—it’s downright arrogance!”

“So, what, you’re saying she should break their hearts? Turn ’em down, and if that makes them sad, then to hell with them?! You think Yotsuba should go back

to her happy little two-timing lifestyle and forget all this?! Do you really believe she's even capable of that?!"

"Ugh... I can't deny that..."

"You remember what she swore back when she decided to date Rinka? That she'd make the people she loves happy, even if that means making the rest of the world think she's a piece of trash! She chose to two-time Yuna and Rinka, knowing perfectly well that there was a chance it would end up hurting them! Why can't she give Sakura and Aoi that same sort of kindness? Why don't they deserve it? Why can't she work up the goddamn guts to look them in the eye?!?!?"

I knew that my inner devil's argument was driven purely by sentiment, and that it flew in the face of all logic and reason. I'd let that same sort of sentiment drive me to two-time Yuna and Rinka...and in retrospect, that decision had resulted in a really solid relationship between the three of us. *Could that really happen again? Is there any way to bring about a future where Sakura and Aoi start dating me and everyone's happy?*

"But if she dates them too, she'll be four-timing!"

"Who friggin' cares?! People are already gonna think she's trash for dating two girls—why not throw another girlfriend or two on the pile?!"

"You're being unreasonable and you know it!"

"Don't give me that bullshit! We've all been acting unreasonably since we started two-timing!"

At that point, my inner angel and devil had devolved into a petty back-and-forth squabble. I, meanwhile, was left to ponder what I'd do. I could choose the path of reason, turn my sisters down, and stay as their family...but if I did, I knew there was a chance we'd never return to the friendly, affectionate sisterly relationship we'd once had. On the other hand, I could throw reason to the wind, give in to impulse, and start dating them...but given that we were related and I already had two girlfriends, that road could hardly *be* more precarious. And not just for me—it would be a disaster waiting to happen for *everyone* involved.

“Yotsuba, what you need to think about is what you want to do...no, what you want to become.”

What I want to become...?

“You made all sorts of plans to convince your sisters to accept the fact that you’re dating Yuna and Rinka, right? But now that you know how they actually feel about you, you’re starting to think that them accepting you just ain’t enough on its own. That’d mean you’re the only one who got what she wants.”

“Wait...are you trying to tell her that she should agree to date them on the condition that they accept her relationships with Yuna and Rinka?”

“Hey, sometimes things just don’t go according to plan! You gotta take things as they come, ad lib your way through it, and go for the option that seems like it’ll work out best in the moment. In this moment, she has a way to grant everyone’s desires...and what other option is there? You saying you have a better plan?”

“Ugh...”

My inner angel was at a loss, and I was too. That’s right. My devil’s plan really is the only way to resolve all of this in one go. But...is that really the right choice? Is this really going to let us become the sort of siblings that I want us to be? Will it really let me be the big sister I wished I could stay as...?

Grrr!

“Ah.”

“Huh?”

“Yotsuba?”

A low rumbling sound had suddenly rung out...the point of origin of which was my stomach.

“I, uhh...guess I’m pretty hungry!” I awkwardly admitted as I felt my face flush with embarrassment.

“Well, it is almost dinnertime,” said Sakura.

“I’m a little hungry too, actually!” added Aoi.

Thankfully, they both seemed sincere—they weren’t just trying to make me feel less weird about my awkwardly loud body noises.

“We’ll finish up this conversation after dinner, then. Sound good, Yotsuba?” asked Sakura, a clear nuance of “you’re not allowed to run away from this” packed into her words.

Aoi backed her up with a nod.

“R-Right,” I listlessly agreed. I was just about convinced that my inner devil was right and the best option really *was* to play along with their feelings, but I just couldn’t bring myself to come out and say it to them...so a halfhearted nod was the best I could offer.



Our whole family gathered to eat dinner together. That wasn’t anything new for us—we tended to eat together whenever everyone was at home in time for dinner—but doing it at the hot springs hotel made it feel special in a way I was really fond of. Plus, eating out meant that I didn’t have to plan the meal, do the cooking, or handle the cleanup afterward! *And* the food itself was more elaborate than the stuff I usually made! We’d arranged for a really fancy, Japanese-style course meal, and given how hungry I was, I was downright moved by the experience.

“Mmmh! This is *so* good!” I said as I stuffed my face.

“Ha ha ha!” chuckled my dad. “Getting to see you make a face like *that* makes driving us all the way out here feel worth the effort.”

That little exchange was another recurring event in our family, to an extent. Of course, I did most of the cooking in the Hazama household, and I didn’t make a habit of getting moved by food that *I’d* cooked, so it wasn’t exactly an everyday sort of deal.

“How about you two, Sakura, Aoi? Enjoying your meal?” asked our mom.

“Yeah,” said Sakura with a nod.

“It’s *so* good!” said Aoi, doing a pretty good impression of me.

This was it. *This* was how our family had always been. This was the best way it *could* be, and the atmosphere was incredibly calming.

“I’m impressed,” said our mom. “You two used to be so picky! Your tastes have really matured, haven’t they?”

“Maybe... I think I prefer Yotsuba’s cooking, though,” said Sakura.

“Me too!” added Aoi. “I guess my tongue’s just used to it or something?”

“C-Come on, guys, you’re gonna hurt the hotel cook’s feelings!” I scolded. *I’m a total amateur when it comes to cooking—comparing my stuff to a pro’s would be no contest!*

That didn’t stop them from smirking at me, though—and for that matter, my mom and dad were smirking along with them!

“I know what you mean,” said my dad with a nod. “Yotsuba’s cooking is what keeps us all going!”

“It’s *such* a big help,” added my mom. “She’s always thinking about the household budget too! I couldn’t be more proud of her!”

“What’re you guys plotting...?” I asked, suddenly suspicious.

“Nothing, nothing!” my parents replied. They’d both had a couple drinks at that point, which seemed to have them in high spirits. This was their long-awaited vacation, and I was glad to see that they finally had the chance to relax, but I kind of wished they could’ve skipped the “teasing their eldest daughter for kicks” part of the process. Not that I wasn’t also a little flattered, of course.

“Anyway,” said my mom, resting her chin in her hands as she gazed at the three of us. “Looks like you girls have finally made up with each other, huh?”

“Huh?!” I gasped...and so did Sakura and Aoi, for that matter. Having it pointed out like that had given me a bit of a start.

“Huh? What, were they fighting?” asked my dad.

“You mean you didn’t notice?” countered my mom.

“I guess not! Well, that’s embarrassing. I never would’ve imagined that *our* daughters would ever fight with each other!” said my dad, scratching his cheek

awkwardly as he tried to excuse away his imperceptiveness. “I mean, they’ve always been so close, it feels like there’s no room for *us*, even!”

“Well, that *is* true,” said my mom. “Whenever anything happens, Sakura and Aoi have always gone running to their big sister first thing! It feels like they rely on *her* more than us.”

“Wh-What? No way that’s true!” protested Sakura.

“No, it definitely is,” said our mom. “And you used to fight with Aoi over Yotsuba’s attention all the time! Don’t you remember?”

“Ugh! I mean, I do, but still...” Sakura muttered, fidgeting restlessly as she glanced over at me.

That part, at least, I remembered clearly as well. They didn’t do it much anymore, but back when they were in kindergarten or preschool or somewhere around there, it was incredibly common for me to end up with Sakura on my right side, insisting I read her a picture book, and Aoi on my left, insisting I play house with her.

“And you know, Aoi,” our mom continued, “Sakura’s your big sister too, but you never treat her the way you treat Yotsuba at all!”

“Well, Sakura just doesn’t *feel* like a big sister to me,” said Aoi. “She never let me play with Yotsuba without a fight, after all!”

“Th-That was ages ago,” grumbled Sakura.

“I dunno,” said Aoi. “You still seem plenty childish to me these days!”

“Grr...”

In my eyes, Aoi was my cute little sister—so cute, she came across as maybe a bit sly sometimes—but in Sakura’s eyes, those qualities might’ve made her look like a saucy little brat. Of course, Sakura had always been on the quiet side, so Aoi’s cheerfulness balanced out her personality pretty well in my book.

“She *is* my sister, yeah, but she’s always felt more like my best friend than my big sister, I guess?” said Aoi.

“I suppose I could say something along those lines about you too,” said Sakura.

“Oh, and of course...she’s also my rival, as far as Yotsuba’s concerned!” added Aoi as she grabbed onto my arm.

“Wha?!” I squeaked.

The way the two of them had opened up about their feelings for me in the hot spring had me feeling pretty jumpy about all this touchy-feely stuff, but it didn’t seem like my parents thought of it as anything out of the ordinary at all. They appeared totally unperturbed, and just smiled at us.

“I remember how when Aoi was little, she used to always say that she was going to marry Yotsuba someday!” our mom reminisced. “I can’t remember her saying that about *you* even once, though,” she added to our dad.

“Tee hee,” Aoi giggled bashfully.

“When you put it that way, I think Yotsuba’s the only one who *did* say that to me,” our dad noted. “Sakura always went on about marrying her big sister too, didn’t she?”

“Th-That was *ages* ago, seriously!” Sakura insisted, blushing as she found herself once again in the spotlight...though not without following it up with, “But it wasn’t *just* ages ago,” muttered so quietly that only I could hear her. Which, for the record, was definitely a low blow!

“Oh, I know,” said our dad. “This is the perfect chance to get a picture of the three of you! Scoot in so I can get you all in frame, okay?”

“Uh?” I grunted.

“Okaaay!” shouted Aoi.

“I-If you insist,” mumbled Sakura, scooting over to grab my other arm.

I was surrounded now, and felt my pulse begin to pound. Was this too much? Would our parents notice that they were being a little *too* touchy...?

“Oh, looks like I won’t have to ask twice!” commented our dad.

“Wh-What do you want a picture for anyway, dad?” I asked.

“To keep a record of how you three looked as you grew up,” said our dad.

“Oh, and also to set it as my phone’s background so I can look at it whenever I

need a boost to keep working overtime. That's part of the plan too."

"Oh, good idea!" said our mom. "Send it to me, okay, dear?"

"I want it too!" piped up Aoi.

"W-Well, I guess you might as well send it to me too, then," said Sakura.

"Can do! I'll post it in the family group chat," said our dad. "Okay, look at the camera, everyone! Say cheese!"

Our dad's phone flashed as the sound of a camera shutter rang out. I felt my phone vibrate a moment later as he posted the picture to our group chat.

"All right! Got it done before I forgot about it. Turned out nicely, didn't it?" our dad boasted.

"Oh, it did!" said our mom with an impressed nod.

I opened up the picture myself. I had to admit—it really did capture a certain something about our personalities. Aoi, who was used to having pictures taken of her, had put on a perfectly photogenic smile, while Sakura, who was a little more reserved, had a slightly hesitant but nevertheless genuine smile on as well. Finally, there I was, sandwiched between the two of them and smiling in a way that I really *hoped* came across as authentic. *I* could certainly see through it to the distress beneath. It was a pretty awkward and—frankly—pretty dopey smile, if I do say so myself.

"Ah—Yotsuba, you're so cute!" said Aoi as she leaned in and peeked at my phone.

"Uh. A-Am I?" I asked.

"Yeah! Isn't she, Sakura?"

"You're right... That's such a *Yotsuba* look," agreed Sakura with a chuckle as she took a look as well.

I was pretty sure they weren't exactly *complimenting* me, but I definitely didn't feel insulted either. I could tell that everything they did—their tiniest gestures, their closeness to me, the way their hands would occasionally brush against mine—were Sakura and Aoi's way of communicating their affection for me. The thing is, though, that none of that was *new*. They'd always acted this

way with me; I'd just never noticed what it really meant. I'd always thought that we were just a trio of particularly close sisters and that they felt the same way.

"Oh, right—hey, Yotsuba, Sakura, Aoi?"

"What is it, mom?" I said.

"I was thinking of taking a dip in the hot springs after this. Do the three of you want to come along?"

"Umm," said Sakura.

"What do you think, Yotsuba?" asked Aoi.

Both of them looked over at me. They seemed a little nervous, and were clearly waiting for me to make the call.

I knew that I needed to address their feelings—to give them some sort of resolution. As for what sort of resolution that would be...looking at the picture our dad had just taken finally gave me the answer I needed.

"I think I'll pass," I said. "I'm stuffed, and I'd rather take it easy in our room for now. We can take a bath together tomorrow morning."

"Oh? If you say so," said our mom. "What about you two?" she asked, looking at Sakura and Aoi.

"I, uh," said Sakura. "I think I'll go back to the room too, thanks."

"Me too!" said Aoi.

"Okay, then—something to look forward to tomorrow for," said our mom. I got the feeling she understood that we wanted a moment alone together.

Thanks, mom and dad, I thought, deeply appreciating the fact that they'd witnessed what was obviously a pretty loaded exchange between the three of us, but had brushed it off without comment. Even more so than that, though, I was grateful for the fact that they'd reminded me of something incredibly important.

And now...I think everything's going to be all right. It was totally possible we'd end up making things awkward for our mom in the bath tomorrow morning, but I was sure of my decision this time, and I was prepared for the consequences.

“Okay, then,” I said to our parents. “See you tomorrow, I guess!”

“Sounds good,” said our dad. “Night!”

“Good night!” added our mom.

With that, we parted ways for the evening. I left the dining hall with my sisters still clinging to my arms, extremely conscious of their warmth as I walked along.



When we got back to our room, we found three futons already laid out side by side on the floor for us. It was definitely still a little early to go to bed, of course, and normally this was the part where we’d turn on the TV and chat until we got tired, or something along those lines...but things were definitely *not* totally normal today.

“Sakura, Aoi...do you have a minute?” I asked. The two of them had been fidgeting restlessly ever since we got back to the room—actually, since *before* we even made it back.

“S-Sure!” said Sakura with a start.

“A-All right,” said Aoi, though not before taking a very deep breath to calm herself down.

It was plain to see that both of them were really nervous, and honestly, I found myself thinking that was really cute of them as I stepped over toward the window. Like many traditional inns, the rooms here had big open spaces by the windows to let you get a clear view of the nature outside, and I took up a position by ours. There was actually a plaque hanging in this inn’s lobby that explained that this sort of space was technically classified as a type of enclosed veranda, and I was pretty fond of the design. It really drove in that traditional inn ambiance.

At the moment, though, the world outside the veranda was pitch black, and instead of seeing the landscape through the window, I saw our room reflected back at me. I saw myself, and I saw Sakura and Aoi, all three of us wearing matching yukata. Just looking at our faces was all it took to tell that we were sisters. The family resemblance was strong, and noting that fact made me a

little happy—plus, it gave me courage. Knowing that my beloved sisters were here with me was always reassuring.

“So, umm,” I began. “Remember what we talked about earlier? I’ve finally come to a decision.”

Sakura and Aoi gulped. Their expressions spoke of a messy mixture of tension, anxiety, and elevated expectations, and I found myself really shaken. I was just as nervous as they were. My legs were trembling, and my heart was pounding, but all that hesitation I’d felt before was gone now.

I think you should be a little more selfish sometimes, Yotsuba!

It’ll be fine! And hey, if it does go wrong, we can just think up a new plan to try next!

The words of the people I loved gave me the push I needed.

Please...let me stay as their big sister forever.

I’d wished that once—but it wasn’t just a wish to me anymore. I’d figured out what sort of big sister I wanted to be, and now I just had to say it. I’d spent so long running away and screwing up. I was a total weakling. But still... *Sakura. Aoi. I won’t turn a blind eye to you anymore.*

“I...can’t have that sort of relationship with you.”

Sakura’s and Aoi’s expressions instantly stiffened up. My chest pained and I could barely breathe, but I couldn’t let myself look away. This was *my* selfishness, and I had to see it through.

After a long moment of silence, Sakura finally spoke up. “Is it...because we’re your sisters?”

“It...is, yeah,” I replied.

“Yeah... That makes sense,” said Aoi. “We’re your family, after all... Having your actual sisters ask you out must’ve been sickening...”

“That’s not true!” I shouted. “I mean, I was really surprised, but...I was *happy* to hear that you loved me. I was happy you cared about me that much. I really was...” A tear dripped down Aoi’s cheek, and I felt my own eyes grow damp as I watched her, but I clenched my fists and forced my way through it. “Sakura, Aoi, you’re both incredible! You’re such good girls, you’re wasted on a sister like me...and I love you, I really do! If I said I wasn’t tempted to just ignore society’s rules and common sense and all that stuff and go out with you anyway, well, I’d probably be lying.”

No matter what I said, I’d refused to have the sort of relationship with them that they wanted from me. It wouldn’t amount to anything more than an excuse...but that didn’t mean I didn’t have to say it. They had poured their hearts out to me, and I owed it to them to put my own feelings into words as well.

“You know I’m kind of a dummy. I *never* really think about society’s rules or how other people will perceive me as much as I probably should. I just do whatever I think is a good idea in the moment and act on impulse...and that’s how I ended up as the two-timer I am. And in the end, I think, ‘Everyone’s happy, so what’s the harm?’ And when I looked at this from that sort of perspective, I *did* start to think that maybe dating you two too...dating my sisters...f-four-timing you all would end up making everyone happy as well. I started thinking that that would wrap all this up nicely—that it was the best possible solution. I’m kinda terrible, huh...?”

“So then...why not?” asked Sakura.

“Sakura...?”

“I said, why *not*?! I really love you, you know?! And if...if there’s any chance you could *ever* see me in that sort of light, I don’t *care* if you’re four-timing us! I just...I just don’t want to lose you... I don’t want you to drift away and leave us behind,” Sakura sobbed as she crumpled to the ground.

I almost reflexively dashed over to her—but Aoi beat me to the punch and was by Sakura’s side supporting her before I knew it.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said. “I’ll always be your big sister—from now till the day I die. I know I’m stupid, and I know I’m the worst...but I won’t give that position up, whether you like it or not.”

“So then...we’ll always be sisters, but you never want us to be anything more than that?” asked Aoi. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, that’s not it,” I replied. “That’s not it...because *nothing* is more than being sisters.”

I paused, took a deep breath, then shouted at the top of my lungs:

“Being sisters is the *best* sort of relationship there could ever be!”

Being sisters means you’re family! It means you spend your whole lives together! It’s the most special sort of relationship you can have—one you can never completely do away with, even if you cut each other out of your lives!

“And that means...I’m *not* losing to you two!” I shouted.

A pause ensued.

“*Huh?*” they both said.

“I love the two of you too! I love you way, *waaay* more than you love me! I’m your big sister, I love you, and that is *final!*”

“Wh-What are you saying?!” stammered Aoi. “You just rejected us, didn’t you?!”

“W-Well...yeah! Yeah, I did! What about it?!” I replied, fully aware of how ridiculously unreasonable I was being. I’d *planned* on being all serious and mature and calm about this conversation, but that had gone totally out the window. This wasn’t going according to plan, sure...but I was a girl who plowed through life’s troubles and hardships headfirst, breaking through to the other side by virtue of momentum alone! I wasn’t acting out of desperation at all. No, this was just *that* important to me, and that meant I had to say it in my own way: by going all in on it!

“No matter what...I’m your big sister!!!”



I'd make them understand how I felt. No matter how clumsy and awkward I ended up acting in the process, I would make it happen!

"O-Our big sister...?" repeated Sakura.

"That's right—your big sister," I said. "Being your big sister's important to me... It's the only thing that's kept me from totally hating myself."

I think this is the right moment for me to tell an incredibly petty story from my past.

Ever since I was little, everyone around me had always told me how hopeless I was. I was hopeless in my studies, for one thing—I always *thought* I understood the stuff I learned in my classes, but the moment a test rolled around or a teacher called on me, all that knowledge would vanish from my mind in the blink of an eye and I'd struggle to get even a single question right. I wasn't much better at athletics either—no matter how hard I tried, I'd come last in every race, catch dodgeballs with my face, and bungle all of the jump rope and gymnastics tricks they tried to teach me. My classmates would all laugh at me, and my teacher would get fed up with me...and over the course of time, I learned to hate myself for it. I desperately wanted to stop going to school, period, but I didn't want to disappoint my parents. I ended up in tears just about every day.

"In *tears*?! No way..." Sakura gasped.

"I had no idea," said Aoi.

"Well, yeah," I said. "I always made sure to do it somewhere you wouldn't see me."

I'd never told anyone about this before. Certainly not my parents...though then again, it's totally possible they knew even without me having to tell them. My thought process was that if they saw me like that, I might use up the last shreds of affection they had for me, and even if they *were* kind and understanding, it would just make me feel even more guilty. It was kind of a pathetic thing to be so stubborn about...but that's part of what led to my ultimate salvation.

"Your *salvation*?" repeated Sakura.

“Yeah...and that was the two of you.”

“Us...?” said Aoi.

She and Sakura exchanged glances, their eyes wide, and I felt such an overpowering sense of love, I couldn't stop myself from hugging them both.

Wow... This feels so...reassuring, somehow. Their warmth, their familiar smell... I almost felt like I was going to start tearing up then and there. *Maybe telling all these old stories is messing with my emotions.*

My life back then had been incredibly hard, incredibly painful...but the moment I arrived back at home, my little sisters would come dashing up to me, completely oblivious to everything I was going through.

“Yotsuba! You're back!”

“Let's play, let's play!”

There was always such a pure and innocent joy in their eyes when they looked at me. I hated myself, sure, but I couldn't bring myself to hate the version of me that I saw reflected in their eyes. I wanted to be the perfect older sister that they thought I was, at least while I was in front of them. And when we watched TV together, or played cards or board games...astonishingly enough, I never seemed to make the stupid pratfalls I always fell victim to at school. I could just have *fun*, without any reservations.

“I...I never noticed at all,” said Sakura. “I mean, having you around has just felt like a given for as long as I can remember...”

“Hee hee! Thanks, Sakura,” I said, squeezing her a little tighter.

“H-Hey, Yotsuba...!”

“I-It was the same way for me!” shouted Aoi. “I mean, I always felt like Sakura and I were rivals, even... We'd always fight over which of us was your favorite...”

“I remember how you always used to tell me how much you loved me,” I said. “Hearing that from you made me so, so happy... It kept me going...”

Nope. It's no use. I'm definitely gonna cry. They were tears of happiness, though, brought about by the memory of everything my sisters had done for

me. Hopeless as I was, my family had always made me feel like I belonged with them. That was a big part of why I'd ended up learning to help out with the household chores. I loved my mom's cooking, and I thought that if I could learn how to cook like she did, I'd be able to make my family as happy as they made me. It was the same for doing the cleaning and the laundry—my parents' jobs were exhausting, so I wanted to help them out, and I thought that even I could do that sort of work...though I guess that might be sort of a rude way of putting it.

It took time. My progress was slow. But little by little, step by step, I grew more capable, more knowledgeable, and every step forward made me feel overjoyed. Sakura's pickiness always had our mom at a loss, so I'd help mom put together recipes that Sakura could tolerate. Aoi had a pretty nasty dust allergy and would start sneezing nonstop when the house got too dusty, so I got in the habit of vacuuming on a daily basis. I did all sorts of things, honestly, but seeing Sakura devour a hamburger steak packed full of minced veggies and say it was delicious, or seeing Aoi roll around on the floor without so much as a sniffle, made it all feel worth it. No matter how tiny their gestures were, they always made me feel happier than I could describe.

"Being your big sister is what let me start accepting myself, at least a little. It's what let me start liking myself. That was all thanks to you two."

"B-But," stammered Sakura, "we didn't *do* anything!"

"You did, though. You were there for me—you told me you loved me." That was all I needed...no, it was more than that. It meant more to me than I could describe. "I love you two, and hearing you say that you love me made me so, so happy! Even if you mean it romantically, there's still no *way* I'd get upset about it!"

From society's perspective, that might've made me a bad big sister, but from my perspective, *society* had it all wrong. I had a feeling that I wouldn't forget this day for as long as I lived. It had become something truly special to me.

"I should be *thanking* you, if anything," I continued. "Thank you for loving someone like me."

"Someone like me"?! Don't say it like that! You're more important to me than

anyone else... I couldn't get by without you..." Sakura sobbed.

"Yeah... I understand that now. Thanks, Sakura," I said, gently rubbing her back.

"Me too... Me too...!" said Aoi, squeezing me as tightly as she could with tears in her eyes. "Whenever I worked hard on something, I always knew you'd praise me for it! I always knew you'd pat me on the head and tell me how well I did! I knew that whenever I was sad, you'd always be right there with me, feeling the same way I did... Sometimes you ended up crying even harder than me."

"Ha ha ha," I awkwardly chuckled.

"That's why I've always been able to give everything my all—because you've always been there for me. You've always been watching over me!"

"Aoi..."

"I'm sorry, Yotsuba," Aoi continued. "I'm sorry we were so distant with you. We were just worried that your two-timing would make you sad in the end. We couldn't stand that thought...so we..."

"Don't apologize—it's okay. I know you were just looking out for me, and I really appreciate it," I said, giving them both another squeeze. For a second I was worried I might be hugging them hard enough to suffocate them, but my concerns were quickly dispelled as Sakura and Aoi hugged me right back.

"I always wanted to be your girlfriend," said Sakura. "I wanted to be someone special to you."

"Yeah... I understand," I said.

"But I guess I...I guess we were *always* special to you, weren't we?"

"That's right... You two are my only two little sisters in the whole wide world. You're incredibly special to me."

"So then...even if you *are* dating someone...we'll still be as special to you as ever?" asked Aoi.

"Of course you will! After all, no matter what happens, I'll always, *always* be your big sister!"

The three of us stayed like that for some time, hugging, sobbing, and letting all our feelings overflow. Our love for each other was too much to contain, and yet they grew more and more beloved to me by the minute. And, above all else, the knowledge that I was just as important to them made me happier than anything.

Love will change your world.

Maybe that magazine was right after all. Up until the very instant Yuna had told me she loved me, I'd never dreamed that I would fall in love. But then I found two girls I loved with all my heart, and though I may have wound up hurting my little sisters' feelings in the process...change isn't always a bad thing. The hands I'd held that day at the shrine were still as warm as ever now that they were embracing me. The tears I'd blamed on the snow now brought me warmth like I'd never imagined. And the wish I'd made had made me...made *us* into the happiest trio of sisters in the world.

Maybe things would keep changing, in all sorts of ways. Maybe this moment would feel like a distant memory before I knew it.

But even if it did, I knew I'd be all right. I knew *we'd* be all right.

"I'll be your big sister forever, as long as you want me to be. Being your sister is what made me the person you love, so please, let me stay this way," I said.

"Of course," sobbed Sakura.

"We'll always be your little sisters too! Forever!" said Aoi.

"Thank you, Sakura. Thank you, Aoi..."

The path I'd chosen wasn't quite my inner angel's "reject them and their feelings for you" plan, and it wasn't my inner devil's "just go out with them" plan either. I'd chosen a different option—an option that would let us stay together as a family. I couldn't say with total confidence that *everything* had turned out perfectly, and I couldn't help thinking that I'd been really bad about putting my own feelings ahead of theirs. It felt like I'd been really selfish...and yet the two of them accepted all of it. They accepted my selfishness...and my

wish for the future.

There was no telling what would happen from here on out. It was totally possible we'd run into a barrier that would prove even harder to surmount than this one had been. Even if we did, though, I was confident that we'd find a way. After all—we were sisters, and I knew now that the warmth the three of us shared would never change, no matter what.



“Ah... Yotsuba, look!” shouted Aoi. She'd opened up the veranda's window and was beckoning me over toward it.

“Keep your voice down! You're gonna bother the other people staying here,” scolded Sakura.

“Oh, don't be such a nag. Anyway, come on! Look, look!”

Sakura and I glanced at each other, then followed Aoi's lead and peered out the window.

“Oh, wow,” I said.

“Whoa!” gasped Sakura.

When I'd looked out through the window a little while ago, I'd only seen pitch blackness...but that was because I hadn't been looking *up*. The mountainous landscape was shrouded in darkness, yes, but far up above was a starry sky so dazzling, it took my breath away. It was the sort of night sky you barely ever got to see on a day-to-day basis, crowded with countless shining stars!

“I wonder if we'll see a shooting star?” said Aoi.

“Oh? Why? Is there a wish you want to make?” asked Sakura.

“Hmm... I guess! Like, maybe...I'd wish to kiss Yotsuba, like you did?”

“Eep?!” Sakura yelped.

Aoi's surprisingly pointed words had clearly caught Sakura unprepared. To be fair, they'd caught *me* just as off guard. I'd been having such a good time watching my sisters' cute little exchange before that curveball!

“Wha—A-Aoi?!” Sakura gasped.

“You’re so lucky, Sakura,” Aoi huffed. “You just went with it and kissed her, just like that! I’m so jealous—I wanna kiss her too!”

“B-But, Aoi,” I said, sliding into the conversation. “We *are* sisters and all, so, y’know...”

“I’m not saying I want to be girlfriends again or anything! I just had a thought: what’s *wrong* with sisters kissing? Isn’t that totally normal?!”

“I-Is it really?!” I asked.

“It is! People do it all the time in other countries! I think!”

“Oh, huh.” *I guess you do hear about people kissing each other as a greeting in other parts of the world, or something along those lines...?*

“O-Okay, but Aoi, we’re Japanese, and that’s not—”

“Oh, and do *you* have any right to say that, *Sakura*? ”

“Ugh! I-I know, okay...?”

She overwhelmed Sakura with a single sentence! B-But, I mean...she is right about that. Sakura sure did kiss me back in the hot spring. It’s not that weird for Aoi to want to do it too, I guess? A-After all...she did say she loves me and all. Hee hee hee.

“Okay, Yotsuba—let’s kiss!” said Aoi.

“Huh?! Wait, was there a shooting star to wish on?! Did I miss it?!”

“Hmm... There probably was, somewhere on Earth!”

“I guess that’s probably true, but I’m not sure that’s how it works...”

“I like to keep my perspective broad, so a global scale works just fine for me!” Aoi insisted, crossing her arms with a stubborn huff.

Cute! Wait, no! This is not the time to be thinking like that! “B-But really, though, sisters kissing just doesn’t seem—”

“It’s just a greeting, honest! Or, umm...a good-night kiss!”

I was feeling really awkward about all this, and I had plenty of misgivings about the idea of kissing her, but Aoi was making it very clear that she wasn’t

planning on backing down. Sakura, meanwhile, was just sitting off to the side and watching silently with a sort of irate look on her face. She looked like a dog that had been told to stay and didn't like it, which was—of course—adorable.

“Oh, I see what's going on,” said Aoi. “You're looking at this in a weird way, aren't you?”

“Huh?”

“I'm just saying I want to kiss you the way *sisters* do, that's all! You weren't looking at me in a sisterly sort of light, were you? *That's* why you're so reluctant, isn't it?”

“N-No way, of course not!” I insisted. “I'm your big sister, and you're my adorable little sister, and that's final!”

“Then it's okay for us to kiss! We're sisters, after all!”

I-I...I guess? Maybe? She's starting to sound weirdly convincing!

“Okay... Mnh!” said Aoi, closing her eyes and puckering her lips.

Look at her! That's definitely the face of a girl who's waiting for you to kiss her! H-How am I supposed to get out of it now?! Oh jeez, I'm starting to get nervous! I mean, Sakura was the one who kissed me...

“Yotsuba,” said Aoi, her tone hopeful and expectant.

“Ugh... R-Right!” I steeled my resolve, put my hands on her shoulders, leaned in, and...

Smooch!

“Ah...”

“Geh!”

Dazed rapture crossed Aoi's face as she let out a sigh, while Sakura drew in an appalled gasp as she watched us intently.

“Tee hee... I guess we went and kissed, huh?” said Aoi.

“Y-Yeah, this really does feel kind of awkward, huh?” I said. “I know we're sisters and all, but I still don't think—”

“Not fair.”

“Huh? Sakura?”

“It’s not *fair* that only Aoi gets to do it! Kiss me too!”

Seriously?! First Aoi and now this?!

“You didn’t kiss *me* earlier; I kissed *you*! It’s different!”

“O-Okay, Sakura, just calm down for a—”

“Yotsuba!” Sakura shouted, cutting me off. “When I kissed you earlier, I did it because I wanted to date you, right?! But we decided that we’re going to stay as sisters instead, right?!”

“R-Right, yeah!”

“So that means you should give me a sister-kiss like you did with Aoi!” Sakura yelled, grabbing me by the arm to hold me in place and puckering up her lips.

“Kiss me!”

“Huh?!” I gasped.

“Oooh? Then I wanna kiss more too!”

“Wha—not you too, Aoi!”

Is it just me, or is this going way overboard?! I mean, I’m not violently opposed to kissing them in a sisterly sort of way—I mean, like, if that’s how it works, I guess that’s that... But, like, I’m spending an awful lot of SP (Sister Points) really quickly here... I’ve gotta conserve my resources, y’know?

“M-Maybe some other time!” I shouted.

“Oh, come on—why not now?! I wanna do it now!” insisted Sakura.

“Me too!” chimed in Aoi.

My little sisters had shifted into full needy mode, and as I did my best to withstand the terribly potent might of their pleading...well, long story short, before I knew it the three of us were slumbering away, all bundled up in the same futon. As for whether or not I’d kissed Sakura in the meantime, or whether I’d kissed Aoi again...that’s, umm, well...let’s just say it’s a secret and move right along, thanks!

Epilogue: Where We Go from Here

“...So, long story short, everything worked out in the end!”

“All questions of long or short aside, I’d hesitate to call that a *story* at all,” said Koganezaki, her brow faintly furrowed with active disinterest as she sipped from her coffee cup. “Between all the ‘some stuff happened,’ all the ‘you know,’ and all the ‘skipping ahead,’ listening to your story was like watching somebody try to review a movie that they’ve only read the outline for. Frankly, I have no clue how I’m supposed to react to this.”

“Ah, er, m-my bad,” I meekly muttered. She probably had a point, honestly. When you boiled the explanation I’d given her down to its concrete, factual elements, I’d basically just said that my sisters and I had gone to a hot spring and made up. I knew that my sisters wouldn’t want me talking about the specifics, and even if that weren’t a factor, I still would’ve skipped them on account of my own embarrassment. As a result, I’d accidentally made the whole make-up process sound hilariously easy. “But for real, though, it was actually really hard to pull off! There were all sorts of super emotional scenes and stuff too...”

“None of which you can tell me about.”

“Right... That’s all stuff that feels best to keep between the three of us...or something, I guess.”

“I see. Well, so long as you’re pleased with the outcome, I’m glad to hear it,” said Koganezaki, congratulating me in her usual vaguely curt sort of way. “Should I take it, then, that you’ve brought this issue to a conclusion on the whole?”

“Yup!”

“Oh, good. Given that you went out of your way to ask me to meet up in person, I was concerned you were going to tell me that things had become even *more* complicated somehow. I’m relieved to hear that isn’t the case.”

The very first thing I'd done after I got home from our family's hot springs trip was report about my success to Yuna and Rinka. The *second* thing was call Koganezaki out to the same restaurant we'd met at before. She'd given me all sorts of helpful advice, which gave me a good enough reason to ask if I could make my report to her in person.

"How's Emma doing, by the way?" I asked.

"The same as ever," said Koganezaki. "Why?"

"Well, she really helped me out too, and I wanted to thank her...but I don't actually have her contact info."

"Oh, really? You should have said something—I could've brought her with me."

"But that would make it look like I was just using you to get to her, and that's not true at all! I wanted to meet with you too—you're not an afterthought!"

"You're conscientious about the strangest things sometimes," Koganezaki sighed as she pulled out her flip phone. "I'll give you her number, then."

"Really?! Ah...but, I dunno. I'd feel sort of weird about getting it from someone else? Like, it feels like I should ask her for it herself..."

"Conscientious and earnest to boot. Remarkable, considering how awful your grades are."

"Ugh," I grunted. "You probably think I'm a total bore, huh?"

"Not in the least," said Koganezaki. "I actually have quite the high opinion of you. Plus, knowing how you feel about these things makes me feel more confident that you won't go spreading my own phone number around haphazardly."

"Wait, were you worried I'd do that before now?!"

"I'm kidding. But in any case, I suppose you'll just have to ask for Emma's phone number yourself the next time you happen to bump into her."

"Well, when you put it *that* way, it feels like getting a hold of her's gonna be super hard..."

“She’ll be ecstatic when it happens, though, I assure you. I don’t imagine she’s had very many people ask for her contact information,” Koganezaki said with a gentle smile.

The look in her eyes told me just how much she cared for Emma. It was the look of a real older sister.

“What? Why are you smirking at me like that?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about how great of a sister you are, that’s all!” I explained.

“Are you...teasing me?”

“Oh, right! I actually had something else I wanted to tell you about today!”

“And now you’re ignoring me.”

That was close—I almost totally forgot to ask her about this! Reporting how my plan had turned out was the biggest reason why I’d met up with her, of course, but the *other* thing was a pretty big reason in its own right as well! “Do you like going to the pool, Koganezaki?”

“That was certainly abrupt...but, well, I don’t *dislike* the pool, at least.”

“Can you swim?”

“Was that supposed to be a joke? And wait—can *you* swim?”

“I, umm... I can swim when it’s shallow enough for my feet to touch the ground!”

“I believe that most people would call that ‘not being able to swim.’”

“I just can’t deal with that *floating* feeling, that’s all... Ah, but I feel totally fine with just lifting my feet up off the ground a little, so I can *basically* swim just fine!”

“By that same logic, jumping in the air is sufficient to prove you’re capable of flying.”

Y-Yikes, she really picked that one to pieces in a hurry! I really thought I’d made a decent effort to defend my image, but she’d argued me into a corner in the blink of an eye. “A-Anyway, I was going to ask if you wanted to go to the

pool together! Ah, the place I have in mind isn't a big, popular theme park or anything, though—it's just a public pool in the neighborhood."

"You want to go to a pool with me? The two of us, together...?" Koganezaki asked.

"Right!" I replied. "You can invite Emma along too, if you want!"

"Hmm... And who would make up the rest of your retinue?"

"My...huh?"

"Ah. That is to say, who else would be coming along?"

"Oh! Umm, aside from you and Emma, just Yuna, Rinka, and my little sisters."

"That sounds *hellish*!"

"Whaaa?!" *Doesn't she mean "heavenly"?! What could be better than going out with your incredible girlfriends, your adorable little sisters, and your super nice friends... Wait, I guess that's from my perspective, huh?*

"The whole source of your recent problem was your little sisters finding out about your two-timing, wasn't it?" Koganezaki asked.

"Y-Yeah," I confirmed.

"Well, then, even if the issue *is* resolved for the moment, don't you think that going out with all of them together might be a little premature?"

"What? No way! Now that the problem's fixed, it's my perfect chance to introduce Yuna and Rinka to my sisters and let them all get to know each other! Strike while the iron's hot, right?"

"I think 'adding fuel to the fire' would be the more apt turn of phrase for what you're about to do...but in any case, you can count us out."

"No waaay!" I moaned. I'd sort of expected her to turn me down, honestly, but that didn't make it any less of a blow when she actually did. *I guess we still don't know each other quite well enough to go out together...but I'm not giving up yet! I'll spend a day off with Koganezaki eventually, and it'll be awesome!*

"I'd appreciate it if you'd *not* drag Emma into your absurd comedy of errors either, if that wasn't already clear," Koganezaki continued.

“Ugggh... Okay. I’ll give up on her too,” I reluctantly agreed.

“Sorry, but thanks. Anyway...is that all you wanted to talk about today?”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess,” I said.

The moment I confirmed I was done with her, Koganezaki got up to leave.

Did that offer at the end put her in a bad mood or something? Maybe I should apologize for—

“Hazama?”

“Uh... Y-Yes?!”

“I, umm...I appreciate the invitation,” said Koganezaki. “My position makes it rather difficult for me to involve myself with Momose and Aiba, but...if you wanted to, then the two of us—or three, if we invited Emma as well—could meet up again, like we did today... Umm, that is to say...”

K-Koganezaki! Are you seeing this, people of the Earth?! This is the real Koganezaki!!! “I’ll keep inviting you to places! For sure!!!!!!”

“Yes...good,” Koganezaki said with an elegant smile, then picked up the bill and went along on her way.

I’m the one who invited her out and she’s treating me anyway?! How is she this cool, seriously?! I drained the rest of my drink, wishing all the while that if I ever got reincarnated, I could be reborn as someone like her. Then I left the restaurant as well.



A few more days came and went, and finally, on a bright, beautiful, sunny morning, the time arrived!

“H-Hey, nice to meet you two! I’m Yuna Momose.”

“A-And I’m Rinka Aiba... A pleasure.”

Astonishingly enough, Yuna and Rinka were actually *nervous* for once—and nervous enough that you could tell at a glance! Their smiles were stiff and awkward, and although that wasn’t enough to stop their brilliant auras from attracting the glances of pretty much everyone who passed us by, the two of

them didn't seem to notice the attention they were gathering in the slightest. Meanwhile, on the *other* hand...

"...I'm Sakura Hazama."

"A-And I'm Aoi Hazama!"

Those two are freaking out just as obviously?!

"H-H-Hey, Y-Yotsuba?! Who *are* these people?! Celebrities?!" Sakura frantically whispered.

"Agh! I can't even *look* directly at them!" Aoi wailed.

Yup—the three of us sure are related, huh? Nice. And, yeah, I can relate—even I still feel a little overwhelmed by them sometimes.

"Ugggh... Now that I'm seeing them up close like this, I can tell they really *are* incredible... They've got, like, an *aura* or something... No wonder they managed to seduce Yotsuba..." Sakura muttered.

"Wait, and we're going to the *pool* with them?! No way! Nope nope nope *nope!*" squealed Aoi.

They'd each seen one of my girlfriends before when they'd witnessed our dates, but it seemed the effect back then had been a lot less potent than meeting them face-to-face.

"H-Hey, Yotsuba? Do you have a minute?" said Yuna.

"Huh?" I grunted as she dragged me over to her and Rinka's side of the equation.

"W-We don't look weird or anything, right? We're acting natural, right?!" Yuna frantically asked.

"Y-Yeah, you're fine! Everything's fine!" I reassured her.

"Your sisters already know that we're dating you, right? And you said they were all right with our plans today... But I don't know," said Rinka, glancing over at Sakura and Aoi. It seemed their reactions were making my girlfriends feel a little uneasy.

"It's okay! Sakura and Aoi just got done in by your aura of amazing, that's all!"

“Our aura of...? Ugh, and this was our big meeting with your sisters too! I was hoping to leave a good first impression,” said Yuna.

“So that’s why you two seemed a little nervous,” I said.

“More than a little,” said Rinka. “Think about it—we’re meeting our girlfriend’s family! It goes without saying that we’d want to get along with them... In the end, I barely got a wink of sleep last night.”

I never realized the two of them were thinking along those lines! That felt kind of nice to know, but also, I was very aware that I was the one who’d asked them to come along. I had a duty to take the lead for everyone!

“Ah...hey, Yotsuba?” said Yuna. “I can tell you’re feeling really gung ho about this, but maybe you could try chilling out a little instead?”

“Huh?”

“Agreed,” said Rinka with a nod. “At times like these, you have a tendency to accidentally dig your own grave. Or rather, the harder you try, the weirder things end up turning out...”

“Mean! But also probably true!!!”

I really couldn’t deny it, so I decided to swap modes. Today, I’d do my best to stay calm and watch over them! *You’ve got this, Yuna and Rinka!*



This being a public pool, most of the people around us were either families or groups of friends around our age or a little younger. That was our pretense for the day, as well—having my two-timing cover blown once was more than enough for me, needless to say, so I’d asked Yuna and Rinka to pretend that we were all just plain old friends for the day. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what would happen if we went to the pool in full-on girlfriends mode. I mean, come on—they’d be in *swimsuits*, for crying out loud! If those two came at me in swimsuits in a girlfriend sort of way, I just *know* I wouldn’t be able to handle it! I’d bet my life savings on it!

“Wait up, Yotsuba!” a voice called out from behind me.

Having gone into hands-off mode, I’d gotten changed in a hurry and hustled

out of the locker room right away, but Sakura and Aoi ended up emerging just a step behind me. I was a little surprised—I'd figured they'd want to linger and chat with Yuna and Rinka in private while they had the chance.

"Yeah, that was awkward," muttered Sakura. "I really didn't want to make them think I was staring or something."

"Right? Especially considering they're going out with our sister," agreed Aoi.

"Oh, you're worrying too much!" I said. "And besides, we're acting like they're just *friends* with me today, remember? Just think of this as going to the pool with your sister and her pals!"

"I bet that would work great, except for the bit where I've never gone somewhere with your friends before either," jabbed Sakura.

"And besides, whatever you're pretending to be right now, you *are* still actually dating, right?" noted Aoi.

"Ugh!" I grunted, withering away from their pointed stares.

"And for the record, we haven't actually given those two our approval yet!" said Sakura.

"Huh?!"

"After all, we've only ever heard *you* describe them! That's not enough for us to figure out whether or not they're actually decent people. A big part of why we came along today was to judge that for ourselves! Right, Aoi?"

"Right!"

N-No way! Is that why they agreed to come to the pool with us so easily?! But, y'know... Hee hee, I guess that just goes to show they're looking out for their beloved older sister, huh? D'aww, those two just can't help themselves! It's almost enough to make me think they love me a little too much!

"That's a super creepy smile, Yotsuba," Sakura pointed out.

"Suuuper creepy!" Aoi confirmed.

"Talk about tough love! Jeez!" I exclaimed.

As I tried to recover from *that* unexpected knife to the heart, I noticed a stir

begin to rush through the crowd around us. A few snippets of conversation reached my ears—bits and pieces along the lines of “Whoa, look at those two cuties!” and “They’re *gorgeous!*” and “Wait, are they actresses? Or models?” I knew what those sorts of exclamations meant: the Sacrosanct had made their entrance!

“O-Oh jeez,” muttered Sakura, who must’ve caught sight of them before I did.

“That’s just too much,” groaned Aoi.

Both of them sounded pretty overwhelmed, and the second I turned around to look, I found out why.

“H-Hey, sorry for the wait,” said Yuna.

“So, umm... What do you think?” asked Rinka.

H-Holy heck, they’re so cute! Yuna descended upon the poolside like a veritable angel, her girly aura turned up to absolute maximum! Rinka, meanwhile, looked *exactly* like a professional model who’d shown up for a photo shoot! Wait, no, not a model—a goddess of water! Seriously, my vocabulary wasn’t up to putting into words how incredible they looked!

“You look *great!*” I exclaimed. “You’re both so cute!!!”

“Th-Thanks,” said Rinka.

“Now I’m glad I spent all that time picking out just the right one,” added Yuna.

“Huh? You bought new swimsuits for this?” I asked.

“I mean, obviously! Rinka and I rushed out to go swimsuit shopping the moment you asked us out to the pool.”

“This is a special occasion, so it would’ve felt like a waste to wear last year’s outfit,” said Rinka with a nod.

“You could’ve invited me along,” I pouted.

“But that would’ve ruined the surprise, right?” said Yuna.

“When you buy a new outfit to go to the pool or the beach in, it’s always more fun to unveil it when you’re actually there, isn’t it?” added Rinka.

Oooh... Yeah, that’s true! Seeing it for the first time like this really did have

some crazy impact! Though on the other hand, getting them to try on swimsuits that I picked out at the store has an appeal too. Now that would've been—

“Does this mean you’re wearing your swimsuit from last year, Yotsuba?” asked Yuna.

“Huh? Oh, no—I actually went out to buy a new one yesterday,” I replied. It was technically a little different for me, though, considering that I’d never actually had an opportunity to wear a swimsuit last year and hadn’t bothered buying one at all.

“Oh, did you?” said Rinka. “Well, yours, umm...suits you really well. It actually made my heart skip a beat.”

“Right, right?!” said Yuna. “I wanna just pick her up and carry her right on home with—”

“Excuse me!” snapped Sakura as she and Aoi jumped in front of me, cutting off Yuna and Rinka’s steady advance. “I was under the impression you were here as *friends* today?”

“Ah! R-Right,” said Yuna.

“S-Sorry. Force of habit,” mumbled Rinka.

“Sheesh... And you too, Yotsuba!” Sakura continued. “You’re acting *way* too lovey-dovey here!”

“S-Sorry, Sakura,” I said, my shoulders slumping. I’d gone and gotten scolded by my little sister—but, well, I *had* kinda asked for it, considering that my unreserved compliments had set the three of us off to begin with.

“Oh, and *by the waaay*,” said Aoi, “*we* went out to pick out swimsuits with her! Isn’t that just a *crazy* coincidence?”

“Wha?!” gasped Yuna and Rinka.

“Oh, it was so much *fun*,” said Aoi. “We had her put on a little swimsuit pageant for us! She tried on a few that were a *lot* racier than the one she bought in the end too!”

“A-A lot...”

“Racier?!”

“Hey, Aoi!” I snapped. It was almost like she was *trying* to provoke them, and if she was, she was doing a really good job of it! Yuna and Rinka were reeling! She wasn’t making stuff up, to be fair—I really *had* tried on a bunch of different swimsuits...b-but there’s no *way* I would’ve ever worn some of those in public! Not a chance! And they hadn’t looked right on me anyway!

“N-No fair,” muttered Yuna.

“I’m so jealous,” said Rinka.

“Ah ah ah! You two are her *friends* today, remember?” said Aoi.

“Ugh!” they both grunted.

She has them completely under her thumb! I could tell that Aoi was acting a little differently than usual, though—I got the feeling she was pushing herself pretty hard to keep that attitude up. She *was* dealing with the Sacrosanct, to be fair, so that was understandable. Their holiest of presences was potent enough to make all the randos around them (one of whom was me) totally fade into the background! Taking on *them* in this sort of back-and-forth couldn’t *possibly* be easy!

Of course, the same could be said of Sakura jumping between us back in the beginning. I had a tendency to think of the two of them as my cute little kid sisters, but they were growing older and more reliable day by day... I felt a *little* bad for thinking like this, considering that Yuna and Rinka were getting the short end of the stick, but speaking as their sister, I couldn’t help feeling a little proud of them.

“Anyway, why’re we still standing around chatting? I think it’s time for us to head for the pool! Right, Yotsuba?” said Sakura as she hooked her arm around my elbow.

“Yeah, good idea! Let’s go!” agreed Aoi, catching hold of my other arm and squeezing it tightly.

Yuna and Rinka let out surprised little gasps, and Sakura smiled. “What? We’re sisters, so this sort of thing’s totally normal.”

“Thaaat’s right!” said Aoi with a smirk of her own.

The two of them seemed to be completely in their element. *Where the heck is all this confidence coming from, you guys?!*

“O-Okay, I see how it is,” said Yuna.

“I can tell they’re going to be tough to handle,” said Rinka.

Both of their smiles looked pretty strained, but the gleams in their eyes told me they weren’t about to back down from the challenge.



If this were a manga or something, this is probably the part where their gazes would physically collide between them in a violent shower of fireworks. I, of course, was the only one who ended up being left out of the combative atmosphere the four of them had going. Sakura and Aoi, in any case, were clearly no longer intimidated by Yuna and Rinka's Sacrosanct aura in the slightest. Not only did they not let me go, they actually crowded in so close that their cheeks were pressed up against my arm, grinning all the while. "We won't let you have her *that* easily!" they said in perfect unison.

I couldn't tell if it had been an incredible coincidence or if they'd planned this out in advance, but regardless, Yuna and Rinka were up for the challenge. "Likewise!" my girlfriends declared, their voices clear and unhesitant.

And there I was, surrounded by all four of them. *You know, I have a feeling they might actually get along well someday*, I thought to myself—though of course, that might've just been me taking refuge in misplaced optimism.

Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta the Second—Fin

Afterword

Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta has received a follow-up!

What's that? "Volume Two"? Nope, this isn't *Yuri Tama Volume Two*—it's *Yuri Tama The Second*!

Now that that's established, here the curtain closes on *Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta the Second*. This time, the story revolved around love between sisters and sisterly love. We got to see dates, flirting, the exposure of a certain someone's two-timing, and the explosive revealing of absurdly powerful feelings that had been pent up for literally years on end...and speaking as the author, writing a story so jam-packed with all of that stuff was really fun! I got to give my personal favorite character plenty of screen time too!

I'd love to write more and more and keep this story going, though at the same time, if I do get to write Volume Three—if I do get to write The Third, I'm not settled on what it's going to be about at all! Maybe I'll dig deeper into the currently established relationships, or give some of the current characters more time in the spotlight, or maybe I'll just go for it and throw a totally new character into the mix—the possibilities are infinite!!!

And with that, I'd like to close this afterword by dreaming of a future in which this series's publication continues and it gets a manga adaptation, a promotional video complete with voice acting, an audio drama, an anime adaptation, a video game, and a film adaptation for good measure. If a day ever comes when that dream is fulfilled, I'll see you from up on stage at the movie's premiere!

Later!!!



“W-Well, **Yotsuba?** What do you think...?”

“We’re not stifling you, are we...?”



*As long as the people I love are happy,
I know I'll be happy too.*

YOTSUBA HAZAMA

A high school girl who's not exactly the brightest bulb in the box, but somehow wound up two-timing her friends Yuna and Rinka with their knowledge and permission. Her little sisters have been worried about how strangely she's been acting lately...



“Do you remember back when we were kids? When you kissed me...?”

SAKURA HAZAMA

The Hazama family's second daughter. A steadfast and reliable girl who can be a little curt with her older sister sometimes, but nevertheless loves her dearly. Currently studying for Yotsuba's high school's entrance exam.



“I love you too, Yotsuba!”

**AOI
HAZAMA**

The Hazama family's third daughter. Her cheerful, innocent nature soothes the minds of all her family members...though every once in a while, her scheming side shines through. Loves her sister to bits. She's regularly asked out by her classmates, but has turned all of them down.

Aoi, who was used to having pictures taken of her, had put on a perfectly photogenic smile, while Sakura, who was a little more reserved, had a slightly hesitant but nevertheless genuine smile on as well.



“Ah—Yotsuba, you’re so cute!”

“You’re right...that’s such a Yotsuba look.”

Bonus Short Stories

In a Twilit Classroom

The Sacrosanct: a pair representing the purest and most ideal form of yuri, admired by all and sundry. I, too, used to be just another of their fans, thoroughly charmed by the bewitching appeal of their relationship. I'd look on from afar, secretly watching the two of them together, taking in their every action with unblinking persistence...in the past, anyway.

"Ugggh," I groaned as I stared at the picture displayed on my cell phone. It was a truly remarkable image, depicting a pair of girls staring deep into each other's eyes in a classroom lit by the glow of the sunset. The picture was downright priceless...and yet, for some reason, looking at it made me feel the strangest sense of discomfort.

"Yoootsuuubaaa!"

"What's wrong? You're scowling."

"Ah! Hey," I yelped as the very same girls from the photo strolled up to me: Yuna and Rinka.

"Finished with that assignment yet?" asked Yuna.

"N-Not quite," I replied.

"Oh, so you're using your phone as an excuse to procrastinate," said Rinka.

"N-No way! I was just, umm...trying to look up the answer to this problem!"

"That's even worse, actually," Rinka pointed out.

The afternoon had passed on by, evening was well on its way to setting in, and I'd been convinced that the two of them had gone home ages ago. Somehow, I'd found myself in the exact same situation I'd been in back when I took that picture.

"Hey, isn't that the picture you took of us that one time?" said Yuna.

“Oh, I see... Did you open it up because you were feeling lonely?” asked Rinka.

“Uhh, *what?* That’s *so cute*, oh my *god!*” exclaimed Yuna.

“I-I dunno about that,” I said. I couldn’t deny that I *had* been feeling a little lonely. After all, if I hadn’t forgotten my homework today, I would’ve been able to spend the afternoon out and about with the two of them, not cooped up alone in the classroom.

“This *is* one heck of a picture, though,” said Yuna. “I gotta say, looking at this makes me understand how we got all those fans!”

“Yeah... But, like...” I muttered.

“I get the impression you feel differently,” Rinka surmised.

“Whaaat? But you were so happy when you took it!” said Yuna.

“No, I mean, it’s not like I don’t like it anymore!” I quickly protested. “It’s a really pretty picture, and you both look great in it, but, well...” I just couldn’t stop myself from feeling that strange sense of discomfort when I looked at it.

“Does it make you feel jealous of us, maybe?” said Rinka.

“Huh?”

“Ahh, *now* it all makes sense!” said Yuna.

“Right,” said Rinka with a nod. “It looks like Yotsuba likes us better as her girlfriends than as the Sacrosanct now.”

“Ah, no, I mean...well, maybe,” I admitted.

The two of them formed a universally acclaimed ideal of perfect yuri, yes...but to me, they were special for a whole different reason: they were my girlfriends. The Sacrosanct was just a facade, and I knew it...but still, the two of them just looked so good together, it was enough to make me feel a little jealous anyway. Would a day ever come when I could measure up to them? I was a little nervous—scratch that, I was *very* nervous about that prospect. And yet...

“Hee hee hee!”

...when I saw the two of them grinning and giggling away at my admission, I

found myself filled with motivation. I'd *make* myself into as good of a match for them as they were for each other—or at least, I'd do my best to move in that direction.

Bed-Sharing: Sakura Edition

After our trip to the hot springs, the three of us Hazama sisters established a certain rule for our behavior going forward: every week, Aoi and I would each get to sleep in the same bed as Yotsuba precisely once!

The once-a-week limit was a pain, for sure, but I knew suddenly co-sleeping every single night would've been a little too much for me, Aoi, *and* Yotsuba. Worst case, Yotsuba might've ended up too restless to sleep at all, night after night! That much sleep deprivation does *awful* things to your skin, believe me. I'd love her just as much even if she did have awful skin, of course, but there was a real danger that *she'd* be so upset about it, she'd rule out sharing a bed altogether! Basically, I'm saying that some reasonable limits were for the best.

Once a week meant four or five times a month and fifty-two times a year. That might sound like a lot, but it was still only one out of every seven nights, so I had to make each and every one of them count! Part of me wanted her to think I was cute and pretty so badly I was almost tempted to go to bed in full makeup...but even *I* knew that would be too much, so I resisted the urge. I *did* put on some lotion to make sure I smelled nice, though!

"Yotsuba?" I said as I timidly cracked the door to her room.

"Ah, Sakura! Come on in!" said Yotsuba, beckoning me inside with a perfectly lovable smile. "This is making me feel kinda bashful—it's been ages since we've slept together like this."

"Would you rather not?" I asked.

"No way," said Yotsuba. "Not at all!"

As I sat down on her bed next to her, I couldn't help but notice how nice she smelled. It was strange—we used the same soap, shampoo, and conditioner, but something about *her* scent felt special.

"It's just that you're usually so prickly with me," Yotsuba continued. "I was

thinking *you'd* be too embarrassed to share a bed!"

"Aoi and I were the ones who brought this up in the first place, so of course I'm not," I mumbled. *And as for the me being prickly thing...ugh! That's just because I'm trying not to let it show how shy I feel sometimes, or, like, 'cause it's really hard for me to act nice naturally these days... Things are complicated for girls my age, okay?*

"All right...should we get to sleep?" Yotsuba asked with a slight, bashful hesitation that I couldn't help but get a little worked up by. I felt my cheeks starting to burn as I nodded in agreement.



I crawled into Yotsuba's bed, and as the scent of her sheets engulfed me, my heart started pounding up a storm. I could *not* calm down for even a second! This wasn't like when I'd slept in her futon back at the hot springs. *This* was the bed she slept in every single day. *Come on, heart, stop it! Settle down, please!*

"Are you sleepy, Sakura?" asked Yotsuba.

"N-Not at *all*!" I replied.

"Okay, then wanna talk a little?"

"S-Sure. Let's. Sounds good!" After all, if I fell asleep, it'd be over just like that. I turned to face Yotsuba, who was lying in the bed next to me. The lights were out and it was pitch-black in her room, but I could still make out her face just fine in the darkness—make out the kind and perfectly lovable look in her eyes.

"Your hair's gotten really long, huh?" she said as she patted me on the head, stroking my hair.

"Y-Yeah," I stammered awkwardly.

"Ah—did you not want me to touch you?"

"Not even *close*! You can pat me more! Actually, please do!"

"O-Oh?"

Ah... That was definitely a little too eager. Look, she's laughing at me!

"All right, then—I think I will."

I let out a quiet sigh as she ran her hand through my hair, just like I'd asked her to. The feeling of her fingers brushing through it was incredibly nice.

"Oh, wow, it's so *silky*," she commented.

"Only because I take good care of it," I said.

"Yeah, I can tell... You're so responsible, Sakura."

"You know...I grew my hair out for you, Yotsuba."

"Huh?! For real?!"

I knew she hadn't figured it out. "A long time ago, you said you admired people with long hair. That's why I decided to let it grow," I explained.

"D-Did I really say that? I mean, it's *true*, I guess..."

"You also said that an anime character with pigtails was really cute once."

"Ah—is that why you tie your hair up so often?"

I gave Yotsuba a look. *I knew she hadn't figured that one out either! She actually forgot!* It was a very Yotsuba sort of thing to do, but it was still a bit of a blow, mentally speaking.

"S-Sorry, Sakura," said Yotsuba. "But, well...I *do* really love how you look with your hair in pigtails! They're really cute, and they suit you so well! I'm pretty sure I like them way more on you than I did on that anime character."

Love. Just that one word on its own made my heart leap, even though I *knew* she didn't mean it in that sort of way at all. "I-I'll never be able to cut it short if you keep saying stuff like that," I grumbled.

"Huh?! Were you planning on cutting it?!"

"No... I was just kidding. I'm planning on keeping it long for now."

In my mind, my long hair was a symbol of how strong my feelings for my sister really were. The dream I'd held for so long—my dream of becoming her girlfriend—would never come true. I was her sister, after all, and while I felt a *lot* more grateful to have that sort of relationship with her now than I ever had before...I still wasn't ready to say goodbye to my deeper feelings entirely. Even though the two of us were sisters, I still loved her from the bottom of my heart.

I was *convinced* that wouldn't change for as long as I lived!

"Oh, *good*," Yotsuba sighed. "I'd be so sad if you cut it—I love your hair! It looks so cool, and pretty..."

She definitely hasn't realized what my hair means to me...but I guess that's fine. Speaking as her sister, I'm not planning on letting go of her anytime soon!

"You can keep touching it until you get sleepy, if you want," I said.

"Really? Won't that make it hard for you to relax, though?"

"No, it's fine. This actually *helps* me relax."

"Oh...? Hee hee, then I guess I have your hair all to myself tonight!" Yotsuba said with a big, innocent smile...the thickheaded little dunce.

You can always have my hair all to yourself—and the rest of me, for that matter. I'd never say that out loud, of course. In return for her stroking my hair, I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a big hug. I knew that I'd be right back to acting standoffish by the next morning when our family was around...so for the moment, I wanted to indulge in her affection—the affection of the one and only big sister I loved so dearly.

Bed-Sharing: Aoi Edition

After our trip to the hot springs wrapped up, we settled on a rule for ourselves: just once a week, we were allowed to sleep in the same bed as Yotsuba!

The once-a-week limit wasn't great, but everything has to start somewhere, right? This sort of thing's always meaningful, even if you don't do it very often! For all we knew, Yotsuba would get so used to sharing a bed with us, we could convince her to give us more and more chances to do it! Once a week meant fifty-two times over the course of a year, and *twice* that if I counted Sakura's turns too! With that many chances, I just *knew* we'd manage to forge an even deeper bond with her. I believed! All I had to do was take the first step!

"Yotsubaaa!"

"Ah, Aoi!"

“Hm...? You’re reading? Is this a bad time?”

“No, it’s fine! I was waiting for you to show up,” said Yotsuba as she set her book down on her desk and took a seat on her bed.

I dashed over and sat down right next to her! “Tee hee!” I giggled.

“Whoa, somebody’s feeling clingy tonight! You’re such a baby sometimes, Aoi,” said Yotsuba.

“Yup! I sure am!” I agreed. I bet Sakura would’ve gotten super embarrassed and spun around in a huff if she’d been told that, but I considered it a compliment—and a really big one! I leaned over onto her shoulder, and Yotsuba patted me on the head. It was pure bliss, honestly.

“So, Aoi...? Are you thinking of staying up much longer?”

“Hmm...” I glanced at the clock and found it was just a little past eleven. Normally I wouldn’t go to bed this early...but after a moment’s consideration, I shook my head. “I think I’d like to head to bed with you soon...probably.”

Oh my god, this is so embarrassing! I mean, I *was* a second-year in middle school. I might’ve been her little baby sister, but from society’s perspective, I was on the cusp of being an adult! Acting like *this* much of a pampered child was a bit much even for me, considering my age...or so I thought for a moment, at least.

“Oh? Okay, then—let’s head to sleep!” Yotsuba said.

“Yeah...okay!”

Just one look at her smiling face put me right back into pampered mode, and this time, I didn’t try to fight it.



“Is it too hot in here for you, Aoi?”

“Nope! I’m nice and warm!”

The moment we climbed into bed, I crawled right over and cozied up to her without hesitation. She seemed to feel maybe a little awkward that I was so touchy-feely, but the fact that she didn’t make a bigger deal about it, as if it

were just a perfectly ordinary sisterly touch, was a bit frustrating in its own right.

No, no, don't think like that! This isn't the time! I was going into this with zero ulterior motives! I was her sister, after all!

"What're you smiling about, Yotsuba?" I asked.

"Huh? Was I smiling?" she asked back. "I mean, I'm just happy! It's been ages since we got to sleep together like this!"

Ugh! How dare you say just what I wanted to hear?!

Yotsuba gave my hair a gentle stroke, and just like that, the warmth of her hand started lulling me to sleep... *Wait, no! No no no! I get to share a bed with her and have her all to myself for tonight! I can't just fall asleep—that'd be such a waste! And yet...*

Yotsuba... I love you.

Why did I have to go and fall for my own sister, anyway? She'd always been there for me and Sakura, watching over us with all the warmth of the sun itself. Sure, she was hopeless when it came to her studies and sports, but the fact that her good points *weren't* that easy to perceive was part of what made her so wonderful in a modest, elegant sort of way!

She was the sort of person who seemed more and more amazing the more you watched her, I guess. There was just something about her atmosphere—something that made me feel a profound sense of peace of mind, just by being with her...and she was a bit of a dummy too, which was also great. I'd loved her for as long as I could remember. Maybe this is what people mean when they talk about imprinting? Even if it is, I was okay with that. After all, I was proud of the fact that I loved her as much as I did.

"You really are such a cutie, Aoi," Yotsuba said as she gave my cheek an affectionate rub.

"Hee hee—thanks!" I replied. Compliments from her were something special. I was so happy, I couldn't stop myself from smirking. "You're cute too!"

"Me? Oh, no way!"

“Of course you are! You’ve got the same genes I do, you know? If I’m cute, that means you’re cute too!”

“Is that how it works...?” Yotsuba muttered bashfully, then blinked a few times in a sleepy sort of way. She really *was* cute. She had no self-confidence, though, and tended to look down on herself in general. She was kind of gloomy on the whole, actually, which is probably why so few people had noticed her adorableness. Lately, though, she’d been cuter than ever—I mean an *explosion* of cuteness! That was probably thanks to her finding her girlfriends...which, yeah, made me feel a little sad.

I’ll always be her little sister, though. I’ll always be by her side. I’ll make her really, reeeally happy, just you wait!

It wasn’t long before Yotsuba had gone from nodding off to out like a light. She looked so adorably innocent and defenseless, my heart definitely skipped a beat or two, and she was so close I could’ve *easily* reached out and touched her however I wanted, just like that—but I restrained myself. I could close that gap little by little, without rushing it. I settled for hugging her, gently enough to not wake her up, and giving her a kiss on the forehead.

“I love you, Yotsuba,” I whispered. That was enough for today. *Next time, though*, I thought to myself, basking in the anticipation as I closed my eyes.

Of course, *then* I started questioning whether a kiss on the forehead had been too bold after all, and in the end I got so worked up brooding over it I barely got a wink of sleep. That, however, was my little secret!

Daily Life with the Hazama Sisters: The Swimsuit Show

“C’mon, Yotsuba! Over here, over here!”

“Don’t run like that, Aoi! You’re gonna trip!”

“*You’re* just being too slow.”

“Ah, hey! Sakura?!”

There I was, being led along by Aoi and pushed along by Sakura. I felt like the filling in a little-sister sandwich as they herded me toward our destination: a big

department store by the station we frequented. On that particular day, the store was running a sale—specifically, a sale on swimsuits.

“Ugh... You know, I really think I’m fine without—” I began.

“Nope, no way!” said Aoi. “You don’t even own a swimsuit, do you?”

“I mean, I *technically* do! You know, the one from middle school...?”

“A school swimsuit?” said Sakura. “You know that would make you stand out *more* than something new, right?”

“I guess, but I dunno...” I muttered apprehensively. There was just this ridiculously crazy aura of glimmering *fashionableness* coming out from that store that I could *not* explain or deal with! It was *not* the sort of place that a fundamentally introverted girl like me could just stroll into!

“Quit worrying so much—we’ll be there with you,” said Sakura.

“That’s right!” chirped Aoi. “We’ll pick out the best swimsuit ever, I promise!”

“Sakura... Aoi...” *They’re so reliable! My little sisters are the most supportive siblings ever!* “O-Okay, then, I guess I’ll take your word for it.”

“Great!” they said in unison, their confidence downright palpable. I knew that I could rest easy with the two of them by my side.

I, uhh...*thought* I could rest easy with the two of them by my side.

“Okay, Yotsuba! let’s start with this, this...oh, and this!” Aoi chirped. “Go try them on!”

“After that, you can try this one. This one too...oh, and that one over there!” Sakura added.

“Uh, umm...Aoi? Sakura...?”

“C’mon, hurry up! We can’t waste time—this store isn’t gonna stay open forever!” Aoi chastised me.

A small mountain of swimsuits was gradually forming in the shopping basket my sisters had handed me. They’d picked out all sorts of shapes and styles, but I wasn’t even sure if any of them would fit me in the first—

“Oh, don’t worry about that. We already know your size.”

“You *what*, Sakura?!”

“I asked one of the workers if it was okay for you to try on a bunch of them, and they said it was fine!”

“Aoi?! When did you have time for *that*?!”

Apparently, Aoi had made a show of desperately wanting to pick out the best swimsuit possible for me and had gotten the staff on her side. She knew *exactly* how to weaponize her little-sister status for the purpose of negotiations!

“All right, I think it’s time,” said Sakura.

“Go on, Yotsuba! Into the changing room!” said Aoi.

I couldn’t resist them and was quickly herded on in.



Soon afterward...

“Umm, guys? Isn’t this one a little, you know, revealing...?”

They certainly hadn’t been kidding about having me try on all sorts of swimsuits, from one-pieces to bikinis to suits that seemed like a strange hybrid of both styles...? Anyway, the point was, I’m talking a *lot* of them! I was well into the two-digit range when they passed me a bikini to try on that felt like it was designed to cover up the absolute bare minimum and nothing else.

“I mean, I’m basically naked in this thing...”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Sakura. “They wouldn’t be selling it in a store if it were *that* indecent.”

“I can’t wait to see it!” added Aoi.

And just like that, they’d blasted me with a one-two combo of reassurance and elevated expectations! How many times was I going to fall for the same old trick?! *But, like, really, though—this one’s just too much. I mean, there’s no way I’m pulling this—*

“Huh? You’re already wearing it?” said Sakura.

“Gyaaah?! Okay, peeking into the changing room’s *definitely* against the rules!”

“Well, you weren’t coming out, so what else could we do?” said Aoi. “And oh, *wow!* Now *that’s* a sexy one!”

“Ugggh... This is *barely* better than walking around in the nude!”

“...”

“Why’d you both go quiet?! Hello?!”

The two of them were just *staring* at me unblinkingly. There was something so profoundly serious about the look in their eyes, even *I* was starting to get a little freaked out.

“Well, it’s not like we can take pictures of you in the changing room,” said Sakura. “Gotta memorize this sight while I can.”

“B-But, I mean, it’s not exactly rare for the two of you to see me in the nude, right...?”

“It’s not about you being naked!” said Aoi. “It’s about you being *almost* naked! It’s actually *lewder* this way, believe it or not.”

“Eek! I-I am *not* buying this thing, okay?!”

“That’s fine,” said Sakura. “Not like you could wear something like *that* around outside anyway.”

“Plus, we’ve already picked out a swimsuit for you to actually buy,” added Aoi.

They were technically replying to my protest, sure, but their tones were flat and their faces expressionless. It felt like they were completely focused on looking at me, to the exclusion of everything else.

“Heh heh heh...” they chuckled lowly.

“*Okay*, those are some *really* scary smiles, you two!”

To make a long story short, my little sisters picked out a really nice swimsuit that even I could admit looked pretty cute on me...but somehow, I had an incredibly difficult time bringing myself to thank them for their efforts. Of course, Sakura and Aoi *did* seem pleased as punch by the end of the day, and speaking as their older sister, I guess I could be satisfied with that, at least!

The Long-Suffering and the Free-Spirited

Allow me, if you will, to take you back to the day the Sacrosanct's fan club went into conniptions over the possibility that the holy duo were having a falling-out.

"Ugggh..."

I let out a deep, deep sigh, expelling every trace of air from my lungs I could possibly manage. The source of my profound exasperation was unambiguous. In fact, as of late, essentially all of my worries traced back to the same source.

"Yotsuba Hazama," I muttered. I'd spoken with her a handful of times at most, and I wasn't party to all the details, but it seemed she'd managed to stand out among her peers, and not in a good way. Her grades were the lowest in her year and her athletic abilities were supposedly just as abysmal.

I wasn't inclined to take her to task for any of those things—everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, as far as I'm concerned—but there was one problem I couldn't sweep under the rug: the people she chose to associate with. The Sacrosanct were a duo special enough in the eyes of our school to qualify as an object of reverence, and Hazama had chosen *them*, of all people, to make friends with.

"Ugggh..."

"Oh, sister dearest?"

"*Eek?!*" I shrieked, my voice cracking into a falsetto.

"I finally found you!"

"E-E-Emma?!"

"Indeed!" said Emma with a beaming smile as she looked down at me—*from the gap between the ceiling and the top of the toilet stall I was in*.

"Emma, this is a restroom! This stall is *occupied!*" I shouted.

"Indeed!"

"That was criticism, not a statement of fact," I sighed as Emma cocked her

head with confusion. If it were anyone else, I'd have assumed they were playing dumb, but in her case, it was most likely genuine. Emma Shizumi was an underclassman of mine who was very attached to me, to say the least, but as present circumstances would indicate, she was also free-spirited to an extreme. "How did you know I was in here, Emma?" I asked.

"Hmm... I sensed your presence!"

"Of course you did." I didn't even bother questioning her claim. It would've been a waste of time, and I knew it—the standards of society at large just didn't apply to her. Her ability to act unbound by common sense was something I considered a positive quality, on the whole...but in this case, it was also a problem. "Listen to me, Emma: when somebody's using the restroom, you *cannot* jump up and look over the door at them."

"But sister dearest," said Emma, "you're *not* doing your business, are you?"

"Doing my...oh. I suppose not, but regardless." As she'd observed, I was just sitting on the toilet seat at the moment. My skirt and undergarments were firmly in their usual positions. As to how Emma could have caught on to that fact *before* she peeked in on me...well, it probably wasn't worth thinking too deeply into that question.

Shutting myself up in a toilet stall on occasion was a habit of mine. I made sure to choose a stall in a restroom that barely anyone used in a far corner of the school, just to make sure I didn't inconvenience anyone in the process. To be perfectly clear, I was *not* one of those sad, socially ostracized students who ate their lunches in the restroom for lack of anywhere better to go, and I *also* had never mentioned any of this to Emma. It seemed I'd have to find a different hiding place in the near future.

"In any case, get down from there, and then we can—"

"Indeed, I understand everything!"

"Pardon?"

"You want to talk with a person called 'Yotsuba Hazama'!"

"...Huh?"

“Your desires are *my* desires, sister dearest! I’m *inspired!*”

“You’re what?! No, wait! Emma!” I shouted as Emma dropped down from the stall’s door and dashed off, the pitter-patter of her footsteps fading away into the distance before I could stop her. “Oh, what on *earth* is she plotting?!”

I rushed out of the stall, but as expected, she was nowhere to be seen. *She was “inspired”...? Did she mean she had a moment of inspiration? Is she planning on doing something to Hazama?*

“No,” I muttered to myself with a shake of my head, “it couldn’t be. I’m sure she was just running her mouth like always. She might have an irrational streak, but there’s no way she’d do anything drastic with *that* little justification.”

Before long, though, I felt my phone vibrate. I felt a distinct sense of unease as I opened it up...and found that I’d received a text from Emma herself. She was still studying Japanese and had yet to master the written language, so her message was full of strange stylistic quirks and misspellings. It took a moment to decipher, but eventually, I managed to more or less figure it out.

“Let’s see...‘Yotsuba in custody rooftop’—*in custody?! She didn’t!* Surely *she didn’t!* “And wait—this didn’t happen in front of *those* two, did it...? I-I have to find them right away! She wrote something about the roof...but no, I should go check in on their classroom first... Ahh, I do *not* need this right now!”

There was no time to waste and no time to think things through. I set off at a sprint.

“Hey, you! No running in the—wait, Koganezaki?!”

“Ah—pardon me!”

It was the first time I’d ever been scolded for running through the hallways. At the time, it felt like a major milestone...but of course, the exceptionally troublesome connection I would forge shortly thereafter would make that milestone look truly petty in comparison.

Daily Life with the Hazama Sisters: The Trio’s Lunchtime

A few days after our trip to the hot springs, I found myself in our kitchen just a

short while before lunchtime. It was my turn to cook once again, and I was busily working away to prepare a meal for everyone. There was one thing, however, that made today rather different than usual.

“Can you pass me the big serving dish, Sakura?”

“Ah, umm...you mean this?”

“That’s it! Thanks!”

Today, Sakura was helping me out in the kitchen! I couldn’t have been prouder of the kindhearted girl my little sister had grown up into!

“You’re gonna pile all that onto the dish, right?” said Sakura. “Here, I’ll hold it for you.”

“Oh, you will? In that case, be sure to hold it by the edges! The bottom’s gonna heat up really quickly.”

“I know, okay?” Sakura pouted, though she also moved her grip to the edges of the plate like I’d recommended.

Today’s lunch, incidentally, was yakisoba! I’d made a big batch, and had decided it’d be fun to serve it buffet-style, piling it all up on a big plate and letting everyone serve themselves.

“It’s not too heavy, right? Have a good grip?” I asked as I loaded the plate up.

“It’s fine,” said Sakura. “I’ll take this out to the table.”

“Great! I’ll grab the barley tea and be right behind you.”

Sakura walked out of the kitchen as I took off my apron, set the frying pan I’d used to soak in the sink, pulled a pitcher of tea out of the fridge, then rushed along after her. I couldn’t let the food go cold, after all!



“Okay, let’s eat!” Sakura, Aoi, and I all clapped our hands in thanks, then loaded our plates up with yakisoba.

“Oh, wow, it smells amazing!” said Aoi.

“I know, right?!” I agreed. “Sakura helped me make it, so I think it’s gonna be even tastier than usual!”

“Aww—I wanted to help cook too!” Aoi pouted.

“Ah. Well, umm...”

“You just weren’t in the right place at the right time, Aoi,” said Sakura, swooping in to bail me out.

“Boooo,” grumbled Aoi. However much she protested, though, preparing *her* to hold her own in the kitchen was simply too high of a bar for me to clear. *Sorry, Aoi.*

“Then again, she’s just *saying* I helped,” said Sakura. “Honestly, she barely let me do anything at all.”

“Uh... Well, I mean, using a cooking knife’s dangerous! I didn’t want you to get cut or burned or anything,” I explained. “Your hands are so pretty, Sakura! If I let you hurt them, I’d get drawn and quartered for sure!”

“No, you would not!”

“I’d get canceled online in an instant!”

“No, you *really* wouldn’t.” Sakura sighed deeply.

Okay, but, I mean—you know what I mean! I’d just feel that guilty about it!

“I told you that I want to learn to cook for myself, didn’t I?” asked Sakura.

“Yeah...” I admitted reluctantly. According to her, she was preparing herself to live on her own someday. Honestly...I didn’t want her to. I couldn’t stand the thought of her moving out! I knew it would happen eventually, like it or not, but that didn’t make it any easier to accept. “Ah—but I wasn’t doing it to be mean or anything! This is how mom taught me back in the day! She never let me touch any of the knives and stuff at first!”

“Oh, really?” said Sakura.

“Yeah! In the beginning, she’d do all the cooking, and I’d just watch and learn from her. She started letting me get involved and do stuff on my own little by little as time went by and I studied her technique.”

“I can’t believe you *studied* anything!” quipped Aoi with biting precision.

“I study all the time! It doesn’t usually work very well, but I still *do* it!” I

insisted, though not without internally admitting that, yeah, I was kinda pathetic in that respect. *Let's just move right along from this line of thought.* "Anyway, whenever you need a break from your studies or something from now on, you can go ahead and ask me to teach you more! Honestly...I don't really like to think about you leaving, but I'll teach you like a big sister should, I promise!"

"Yeah, I know. Thanks, Yotsuba," said Sakura. "I'm sure I'll be able to help you out every once in a while once I've learned to cook too."

How does she always know just what I want to hear? I'm so lucky to be her sister!

"Hey, if she's just watching and learning to start, then I can tag along, right?" asked Aoi.

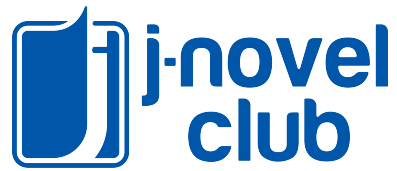
"Hmm... I guess it'd be fine if you *just* watch...but there's all sorts of ways to hurt yourself in the kitchen, so I need both of you to be on your best behavior, okay?"

"Sure," Sakura said as she nodded.

"Okaaay!" exclaimed Aoi with a beaming smile.

They weren't the only ones who'd have to be on their best behavior, of course. I'd have to be extra careful not to get too worked up and make all sorts of amateurish mistakes as well!

...Or so I'd thought, but it wasn't long before I started thinking about watching some cooking videos online to learn some fancy new tricks. A big sister's gotta show off sometimes, after all!



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